Lessons in Leadership

The Life of Sir John Monash GCMG, KCB, VD

By

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**Introduction**

The man that I would like to talk about today was often referred to in his lifetime as ‘the greatest living Australian’. But today he is known to many Australians only as the man on the back of the $100 note.

I am going to stick my neck out here and say that John Monash was arguably the greatest ever Australian. Engineer, lawyer, soldier and even pianist of concert standard, Monash was a true leader. As an engineer, he revolutionised construction in Australia by the introduction of reinforced concrete technology. He also revolutionised the generation of electricity. As a soldier, he is considered by many to have been the greatest commander of WWI, whose innovative tactics and careful planning shortened the war and saved thousands of lives.

Monash was a complex man; a man from humble beginnings who overcame prejudice and opposition to achieve great things. In many ways, he was an outsider. He had failures, both in battle and in engineering, and he had weaknesses as a human being which almost put paid to his career. I believe that we can learn much about leadership by looking at John Monash and considering both the strengths and weaknesses that contributed to his greatness.

**Early Days**

John Monash was born in West Melbourne in 1865, the eldest of three children and only son of Louis and Bertha. His parents were Jews from Krotoshin in Prussia, an area that is in modern day Poland. They had anglicised their name, Monasch, by dropping the ‘c’.

John’s parents spoke German and young John grew up bilingually. In fact, his Jewish faith and German ancestry were to present him with significant challenges later in life, in particular in WWI, as we shall see later.

John’s father was a shop-keeper. After some very lean times in Melbourne, he moved the family to Jerilderie in NSW, where he opened a store. There, young John met Ned Kelly, not during the famous siege of Jerilderie in February 1879, but the previous year, when Ned visited the Monash home to sell Louis a horse. John held Ned’s horse and Ned gave him a shilling. Later, Monash said that Ned also gave him ‘some good advice’. He never said what that advice was but, given their respective outcomes, perhaps it was advice that Ned himself should have taken!

John attended the local State school where he came to the attention of the schoolmaster, William Elliott, for his intelligence and his proficiency in mathematics (which Monash would later on refer to as ‘the language of the engineer’). Elliott urged Bertha Monash to further John’s education and she moved the children back to Melbourne, where John was enrolled in Scotch College. Scotch was a Presbyterian school but, at a time when many clergymen railed against the Jews from the pulpit, the Headmaster of Scotch, Alexander Morrison, took a much more ecumenical approach. Jewish students in particular were welcomed – in fact Scotch had a Hebrew master and it was there that young John learnt Hebrew.

John excelled at school, in particular in mathematics and languages but he also had a great interest in drama and music. He had started the piano at age five and became a pianist of concert standard, giving many public recitals during and after his university days. He was, in fact, a polymath.
John matriculated from Scotch as equal dux in 1881. Dux the previous year had been James McCay, who also went on to become an Australian General (and arguably a much more controversial one) in WWI. In his public exams Monash won the Exhibition (scholarship) in maths with first class honours, as well as firsts in French and German.

**University**

The Exhibition prize of £25 meant that Monash could finance his first year at Melbourne University. Money in the Monash household was still as it had always been, very tight. Monash would have to finance his own way through university.

Interestingly, Jack Monash (he was now known to his friends as Jack), enrolled initially in arts. He subsequently re-directed his academic program towards a double degree in arts and engineering, as in those days (engineering had only just become a degree at Melbourne) the first three years of the engineering program were arts based, with majors in maths and physics.

Monash was not a good student, and failed his first year! It was not that he wasn’t bright (he certainly was), but there were too many distractions. Drama club, the theatre, student politics, the fairer sex (Monash was actually somewhat of a rake – more about that later!) and the need to earn a living to finance his studies and help the family, all conspired to retard his progress. In the end, it would take him nine years to complete his engineering degree.

**The Engineer**

By the time he ‘formally’ graduated, Monash was already working as an experienced engineer. During his studies he found a position on the team constructing Melbourne’s Princes Bridge. His first task was to prepare the specifications for the masonry. His responsibility on the project grew, in spite of some calculation errors and a collapsed coffer dam, and he worked on the project to completion.

By the end of the Princes Bridge project, his reputation and abilities were sufficiently developed to gain him the job of supervising engineer on the construction of the Outer Circle railway through Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. He was only 22 years of age.

He had to engage his own Clerk of Works and his choice of clerk almost ended his career. He engaged 24 year old Fred Gabriel and set up an office in Fred’s house, which was close to the railway.

He also set up a torrid affair with Fred’s wife, Annie. Fred found out, which made for some very interesting times during the processing of progress claims and variations! Jack begged Annie to take her son Gordon and run away with him and she eventually agreed. In these Victorian times such a scandal would have ruined his career, even though he himself was unmarried. And remember, he had not yet graduated as an engineer. They planned to go to Sydney or Adelaide and Monash would have to start again. And his military career, which I have not yet mentioned, would be in ruins.

It was not to be. Catching them in the act of running away, Fred confronted Monash in the middle of Toorak Road, knocked him unconscious and whisked Annie and Gordon away in a Hansom Cab. What drama – better than any of Jack’s university drama club performances! In fact Fred whisked Annie and Gordon away to Sydney and out of Monash’s life altogether. Or so he thought. Jack and
Annie continued to communicate and the relationship lasted until her death in 1929. And Gordon served under Monash’s command in WWI.

Who says engineers are dull?

I digress, back to engineering. The completion of the Outer Circle line coincided with two things: Monash’s graduation and a major economic depression. Engineers were being retrenched in numbers. Monash got a job with the Harbour Trust and hated it. In 1894 the depression deepened and he was retrenched. By now married to Hannah Victoria Moss (Vic), things looked uncertain.

But he had other strings to his bow. In 1891-2 he crammed his way through a law degree and commenced practice in engineering dispute resolution and expert witnessing. This was increasingly successful. Even though he had only just graduated, he was by now a highly experienced and competent engineer with his own consultancy, Monash and Anderson. But the consultancy struggled – things were still tough in Victoria.

Then Monash had the opportunity to introduce into Victoria the new French technology of reinforced concrete. He formed an alliance with a construction contractor, Frank Gummow, and started to win contracts for bridge construction with local councils. The new technology was still treated with suspicion and every bridge they built was heavily test loaded. One cracked under load – Monash repaired it at his own expense. One, a skewed arch bridge at Bendigo, collapsed during testing, killing a bystander and propelling the city engineer into the river. Monash immediately agree to redesign and rebuild the bridge at his firm’s expense.

At the coronial inquiry, it was demonstrated by an expert witness that the then accepted method of structural analysis for skewed arches was flawed. No fault was found. Monash rebuilt the bridge and his business continued to grow. He diversified the business and with another contractor, David Mitchell, founded the Reinforced Concrete and Monier Pipe Construction Company. We know this company today as Monier Concrete Products. If Monash’s bank balance was singing a pretty tune so was David Mitchell’s daughter, Nellie. She became known to the world as Dame Nellie Melba.

Monash’s business continued to expand and eventually made him a wealthy man.

The Soldier

But what of Monash the soldier? Monash was drawn to soldiering during his university days – he saw it as a logical extension of his engineering planning and problem solving skills and, what’s more, he loved the fancy uniforms!

What is also interesting is that, in his military career, Monash never served as an Engineer.

He joined the university regiment as a student and, when that was disbanded, he joined the artillery. From private soldier, he became a sergeant at age 20, a lieutenant at 22 and a captain at 30. His engineering organisational skills transformed his units. He saw this as a new military age where technology would sweep away the old ways and he threw himself into the study and promotion of new military technology – the artillery was the perfect place to do this.

He co-developed a new artillery training gun. He lectured regularly on new technology and its application to artillery and munitions. He also had a style of command which, while based around
strict discipline and military rigour, ensured that every man knew what he had to do and understood why he was doing it. Very different from the ‘traditional’ approach to command, which would be shown to be disastrously inappropriate in WWI.

Australia’s federation meant a new military structure and Monash moved from artillery to intelligence (where he revolutionised Australian military mapping) and thence to command. He became a Lieutenant Colonel in 1908 (at age 43) and Colonel and Brigade Commander in 1913. He proved his command skills at military exercises before no other British military personages than General Sir Ian Hamilton (later sacked during the Gallipoli campaign) and Lord Kitchener himself. His pamphlet, *100 Hints for Company Commanders*, became a respected training document. But in 1914 he was only a 49 year old Colonel, not really a spectacular career rise.

Then the war came.

**The General**

At the outbreak of war, after a frustrating but brief period as Chief Censor, he was appointed to command the 4th Brigade. This appointment was not without difficulty. He had made enemies in the military with his advanced thinking and a whispering campaign started, based around his German and Jewish origins. That he and his children (he had only one, a daughter) had been born and educated in Germany (wrong). That Monash had trouble speaking English (very wrong). Fortunately, senior officers who had seen him in action rejected all of this nonsense and he was appointed.

But his enemies would not stop.

Monash commanded the second Australian troop convoy to Egypt and the training of his Brigade was considered outstanding. His Brigade was in reserve for the Gallipoli landing and he landed on April 26th 1915.

Monash and his Brigade took part in a number of the major actions of the Gallipoli campaign including the (disastrous) offensive on Hill Baby 700. Some, including war correspondent CEW Bean and corps Commander Lieutenant General Birdwood, considered his performance mediocre. However, it must be remembered that his job was to carry out battle plans devised by others, including generals later disgraced or sacked, with sick and exhausted soldiers (disease was rife), against impossible objectives and underestimated opposition, with inadequate maps. The story of Gallipoli, I am afraid! But his Brigade performed as well as any and attacks such as Baby 700 were strongly opposed by him. Bean would later say that Monash ‘would command a division better than a brigade and a corps better than a division’. Just like engineering, he learnt from every mistake he made and every mistake he saw.

In July he was promoted Brigadier General, but at the same time rumours were rife that he had been shot as a spy! The Turkish supreme commander was German, Otto Liman von Sanders, and the story went that Monash was passing messages in German to the Turks, to pass on to him. Some foolish spy, if he was passing on messages that would result in thousands of Turks charging straight at him with rifles and bayonets!

The whispering campaign had started again. One visitor to Monash’s home even told his wife that he had resigned under the strain of command and was on his way home. None of this was true, but...
the whispering would not stop. Some soldiers even wrote home saying that they had been at the execution!

The end of the Gallipoli campaign saw Australian troops return to Egypt. The AIF was reorganised and expanded with new recruits. Consideration was being given to new commands and Monash was considered in that light. But initially promotion did not come. The rumour mill was running again – his German origins would make him ‘unsound’ to command against a German enemy. When someone suggested that he would be removed from command because of his German heritage, he said “And they will also remove the King, I suppose!” He was not a regular soldier but a reservist – he was not ‘in the club’. However General Birdwood, who had recognised the reality of Monash’s achievements on Gallipoli, felt that he should be given a chance at divisional command. So in June 1916 he was promoted Major General and given command of the 3rd Division.

1 July 1916 saw the commencement of the Somme Offensive, an attempt by the British to take the pressure off the French by mounting a major offensive against the Germans in the Somme Valley. It was a disaster – 60,000 casualties on the first day, including 20,000 dead! Australian troops suffered too – 2,000 dead in a single night at Fromelles on the 19th of July. These losses are beyond our modern day comprehension. But Monash was not yet there – the 3rd Division was in training in England and did not arrive in France until November 1916.

Monash very quickly made his mark on tactics and operations. Unlike British commanders, he did not believe in wide, sweeping head-on attacks over wide fronts, with the consequent breakdown in communications and the difficulty in resisting the inevitable German counter attack. Such tactics cost huge numbers of men for little if any gain – The Somme offensive cost 420,000 casualties in 5 months – 2 casualties for every centimetre of ground gained!

Monash believed in the tactics of ‘bite and hold’ - offensives over a limited front where you hit the enemy hard with as much technology as possible and attacked only what you knew you could hold. Such battles were carefully planned and based on comprehensive mapping and intelligence. The emphasis was on minimising losses – careful planning was intended to maximise the chance of success while protecting the attacking troops as much as possible. Once you bit a sector off and held it, you could bite another, and another, and eventually you would achieve that ‘wide front’ gain with substantially fewer losses.

Monash’s first example of this was the Battle of Messines. Messines Ridge was a key high point in the German front. Monash attacked it on 7 June 1917 and the Australians had the upper hand in only 45 minutes. To say Monash’s planning was detailed is an understatement – his battle plan was a layered document of detailed objectives, procedures, maps and orders that was developed in consultation with all of his battalion commanders. The detail and consultation was such that soldiers, right down to platoon and section level understood what they had to do and why. As a document it was 15 centimetres thick! British commanders were aghast – none had ever seen such a document and none had ever written one – few ever would. But it worked.

His success as a Divisional commander continued through 1917 and into 1918. In November 1917, after significant pressure from the Australian government to unify the Australian troops under Australian command, the Australian Corps was created. General Birdwood was the initial
commander but he was not really suited – he was an administrator at heart and he was not Australian. He would eventually command the British Fifth Army.

So who would command? To many, the obvious choice was Monash. He was a sound organiser, planner and administrator as well as a brilliant strategic and tactical commander. But the wolves were once again at the door: two of them, namely CEW Bean and Keith Murdoch, the father of Rupert. Bean had taken a dislike to Monash on Gallipoli – the basis of this dislike was almost certainly anti-Semitism. Bean in his notes and writings made many pejorative references to Monash as a ‘pushy Jew’.

Murdoch was different. He had a chip on his shoulder that Bean and not he was the official Australian correspondent. But after a dispatch from Gallipoli that played a major part in the dismissal of the British commander Hamilton, Murdoch thought he was a king maker, or rather a General maker.

Bean and Murdoch lobbied scandalously and dishonestly for Brudenell White to be appointed Corps Commander. But White had been Birdwood’s staff officer and had not commanded under battle conditions: he did not want the job. But Bean and Murdoch lobbied everyone – the British, the Australian Prime Minister and the Governor General. They said that all of the Australian Divisional, Brigade and Battalion commanders wanted White. That was not true, they all wanted Monash.

Eventually, the dishonest and integrity-free lobbying of Bean and Murdoch was seen for what it was. Monash had some very powerful supporters, including Hamilton, Haig and King George V himself. The British General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commander of the Fourth British Army of which the Australian Corps was a part, went so far as to describe Murdoch as ‘a mischievous and persistent villain’. Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes had seen Monash’s battle preparations and successes and was impressed, even though he had initially leaned towards the detractors.

In May 1918, Monash was confirmed as the Commander of the Australia Corps.

Meanwhile the war continued. Following the Russian Revolution in October 1917, Russia surrendered. The war on the eastern front was over. The Germans transferred a million soldiers to the western front and in March 1918 commenced an offensive that almost won them the war. The British were pushed back in the Somme and the Germans opened a breach of 60 km in the British lines. They were only 30 km from Amiens, which in turn was only 120 km from Paris. The British seemed powerless to stop them.

In the end, it was largely the Australian and Canadian Corps that stopped the offensive and turned it around. Monash proved himself to be a dynamic commander in the fluid conditions that prevailed, something that the ‘set piece’ British commanders were not. The village of Villers-Bretonneaux was shaping up to be a key piece in this desperate jigsaw puzzle and it was re-taken heroically on 25 April 1918, while Monash was still 3rd Division commander. Today, the town hall still flies the Australian flag, the main street is the Rue Melbourne and the school is emblazoned with the motto ‘Do Not Forget Australia’.

On 4 July 1918 came ‘the perfect battle’, Le Hamel. Hamel was a village held by the Germans only a few kilometres from Villers-Bretonneaux. To many commanders it appeared insignificant. To Monash it was the key. He planned to take it.
Monash went about it with his usual attention to detail. The first commanders’ conference to plan the battle had 133 agenda items! Every aspect of the battle was dissected and planned in detail and all commanders had the chance to input and comment. But once a decision was made, they moved on. Monash was running his army like a huge engineering corporation.

At dawn on July 4th 1918, 8,000 troops attacked the Germans at Hamel. The choice of July 4th was deliberate – 1,000 of the troops were Americans. Monash wanted 2,000 but the American commander, ‘Black Jack’ Pershing, objected to Americans being placed under non-American command. Pershing wanted to pull them all out but the Americans themselves rebelled – they wanted to fight. This is a story in itself.

In the battle, Monash successfully used coordinated infantry and tanks for the first time, placing the tanks under infantry command. He used aircraft to resupply the machine gunners with ammunition. He even used decoy missions by noisy aircraft to drown out the noise of the tanks as they moved into position. He said the battle would take 90 minutes – it took 93!

Hamel was followed by the Battle of Amiens on 8 August, described by the German General Ludendorff as the ‘black day for the German Army’. The Germans now knew that they could not win. The Battles of Mont St Quentin and Peronne followed. By the beginning of October, the allies had taken the Hindenburg line. The Germans sued for peace and the Armistice came on November 11th, 1918. The war was over.

In August, King George V visited France and knighted Sir John Monash in the field – the first British commander to be knighted in the field in over 200 years.

The Australians were out of the front line when the war ended, having been withdrawn in October. The AIF was badly battered and severely understrength. But they had done it. Under Monash’s command they had played a major part, arguably the major part, in turning defeat into Victory.

There is no doubt that Monash’s aggressive and well planned campaign shortened the war and saved thousands of lives. Monash was hailed by many as the greatest commander of WWI.

Peace
The war was over, and now commenced the task of bringing 180,000 Australians home. Monash was appointed Director General of Repatriation. It took 18 months and was a triumph of his organisational skills. Those waiting were given an opportunity to gain training and education. Oxford and Cambridge, farms and factories took the Aussies in. They even found a circus for a Tasmanian who wanted to be a lion tamer! His job over, Monash returned to Australia in November 1919.

The Final Years
Monash’s return to Australia was not kind to him. In early 1920 his wife Vic died – she had suffered for most of the war years with cervical cancer. Theirs had been a tempestuous relationship and during the war he had taken up with an old friend of hers, Lizette Bentwitch, who was living in London. But Monash was shattered by Vic’s death, notwithstanding the fact that Lizette then moved back to Melbourne and they were together for the rest of his life. He was a complex man.
On a professional level Monash was ostracised. Prime Minister Billy Hughes was a vain and prickly little man and he saw Monash as a political threat. Several generals, including Pompey Elliott and Bill Glasgow, went into politics after the war. Hughes saw Monash as a direct competitor and made sure that no military or Federal Government positions came his way. Keith Murdoch, back in Australia and as self-important as ever, helped Hughes in that task.

However, The Victorian Government made him the head of the newly formed State Electricity Commission of Victoria. There he embarked on an ambitious and technically difficult program of providing Victoria with cheap and efficient power based on the use of brown coal from the Latrobe Valley. From our environmentally conscious viewpoint in 2012 we may view the use of brown coal as dreadful, but this was the 1920’s. Monash ensured that electricity was no longer a ‘rich man’s commodity’ (he actually used those words) and he set the foundations of Victoria as an industrial and economic power in the Australian Commonwealth. The Engineer was at work again.

Monash also became the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University; an honorary, part time job to which he gave, as with all of his tasks, a full time effort. His creed was ‘I always have room for one more task’. He was a firm advocate for returned servicemen and it was his effort that saw Anzac Day grow to the de-facto national day it now is. He drove relentlessly for the construction of the Shrine in Melbourne, very much against the efforts of his old enemy Murdoch, who thought it a dreadful idea. Monash won. Again.

In 1929 The Institution of Engineers Australia awarded him the Peter Nicol Russell Memorial Medal.

He was still a man of outstanding influence, often referred to as ‘the greatest living Australian’. Just before Melbourne Cup Day in 1923, the Victoria Police went on strike. Looting and rioting broke out in Melbourne. The Victorian Premier called Monash, who called his old Generals Elliott, McCay and Johnson. Old diggers flocked to serve ‘the old man’ again and in a short time Monash had five battalions of special police, organised, fed and managed like a military campaign. This was no vigilante force. In a very short time peace was restored and the strike was over.

In 1928, Monash put to State Cabinet a proposal for additional funding for the SEC. It was rejected. Next thing, Monash arrived in the outer office of the Cabinet room, fronted a junior Minister by the name of Robert Menzies, and demanded to address Cabinet. The Premier let him in.

‘Gentlemen’, he said, ‘you have rejected my proposal because you have clearly failed to understand it’. He explained it to them. For thirty minutes. In the end, they agreed! He then said ‘Well, you will now need an Order in Council to implement the decision’, pulling from his pocket one that he had prepared earlier. He stood there while it was signed.

With the advent of the Great Depression came political and social unrest. Right wing groups sprang up, many run by old diggers (including some very senior ones). Groups approach him to lead them, to lead a coup, to overthrow the Government and to take control of Australia by force. He would have none of this – change must come through the ballot box. To one group he responded with the wonderful line ‘If you are prepared to trust my leadership, you must be prepared to trust my judgement’. If only we could do this today!

But all of this was taking a toll on Monash’s health. By 1930 he was a frail and ill man with heart problems. The end came quickly; on 3 October 1931 he had a massive heart attack. He died at his...
home in Toorak, Iona, on 8 October. He was 66 years of age. It is estimated that over 250,000 people lined the route of his funeral procession.

The Greatest Living Australian was gone.

**Epilogue**

So what can we learn from Monash the leader? He was a complex man, a man of great ability but also with some great flaws. He was an outsider: a Jew, not a regular soldier, a man who challenged traditional thinking but also made enemies by the sheer power of his vision and his determination to see it through. But while he may have been scathing about his enemies in his personal diaries (he was scathing about himself in his diaries as well), he was always courteous to their faces. He even wrote a kind note of consolation to Murdoch when the Shrine was approved. He was magnanimous in both defeat and victory.

As a leader, he was a great planner. He left nothing to chance. But he realised that he could not do this on his own. His planning was a classic example of consultation – everyone was consulted, everyone was given a chance to input and all views were respected. Monash never talked down to anyone. It was said about him that he made imbeciles feel like intellectuals (at a time when many British generals made it a point to do the exact opposite).

He understood the character of the Australian soldiers and how to motivate them. He knew that they would not do what he told them unless they understood fully what they had to do and the reason why they had to do it. Clear and concise communication was essential. But this was not a popularity contest and there may come a time when you have to simply tell them to do it. If so, explain why you are telling them, and always respect the dignity of the individual.

He brought out the best in people: a best that was not always there later on. His staff officer was Thomas Blamey, later to command Australian forces in WWII. Blamey shone under Monash and was later Australia’s first Field Marshal, but as an individual it can be argued that his personality left much to be desired. That too is another story.

To summarise, let me read you a quote. On Anzac Day 1924 the RSL organised a remarkable banquet in Monash’ honour in the Melbourne Town Hall. Albert Jacka VC had suggested that diggers speak about Monash at the function. One ex-soldier, terming himself a ‘digger spokesman’, took the floor.

“The standard by which they judged him was personal efficiency, character and integrity. Mass opinion was almost always an infallible index of a man’s true worth. The secret of his popularity lay in the fact that he possessed that rare and indefinable quality which entitled the man to be regarded in the digger’s eyes as “dinkum”.

I would also like to end with a second quote, from Sir John himself. Addressing a graduating class at Melbourne University, he said:

“Make it your creed to equip yourself for life, not solely for your own benefit but for the benefit of the whole community.”
References


