ANZAC - the legend and the legacy. Three words that mean many things. Three words that have a particular poignancy and a resonant power for Australians young and old. On one level, ANZAC is simply an acronym of convenience – the Australia New Zealand Army Corps put ashore at Gallipoli on the 25th of April 1915. No one thinks of it simply as an acronym any more. That’s where the legend comes in. And this is where we need to be careful. Legend can imply myth, and with it, distorting and diluting everything that ANZAC was, and everything that ANZAC is. Legacy; the third word, those Australians who accepted the risk, regardless of time, regardless of place, and were willing to be put in harms way are the people who we remember. They are the people we honour. ANZAC is not an acronym, ANZAC is flesh and blood and sacrifice. It is memory. It is mourning. It is personal, it is cultural, it is national. It transcends legend. It soars above myth; it is a reality. It is a reality that we acknowledge today, each of us quietly in our own hearts and minds. It is not vain. The legacy is alive in the organisation that bears that name. The commitment given by those who served to support to support the families and children of those who did not return. Legacy and ANZAC are uniquely Australian. The idea, as I conceive it, is that those who we honour had as their dearest wish that they would be the last ANZACS. The way of the world has denied that wish. But we understand that Australia’s civilians in uniform accepted a burden and made a commitment for what they saw as a legacy that they can bequeath to later generations. My generation has been spared the tragedy of world war, but although it might seem trite to some, there is real power in that simple phrase, Lest we forget – because if we do, we are the poorer. If we do, we surrender a legacy rich in sacrifice and nobility of spirit. I also like to think - and, as a student of history, any reading of the primary sources will recognise this, - that the original ANZACs would be pleased, in a typically Australian fashion, that what they gave us were those two truly Australian things – the prospect of a long weekend and a game of two-up without police interference. I don’t see that as being in any way disrespectful to their memory, for this is who they were. Some of the original ANZACs, when wounded, pleaded to be allowed to go back onto the battlefield – not out of heroism, nor out of an egotistical assumption that they were indispensable – but simply due to the legacy of mateship, the legacy of mutual concern – concern for a nation, concern for comrades in arms, concern for family, and a desire that future generations might be spared the experience of finding one’s self in harm’s way. There is a tendency on a day like this to over generalise. We need to think of the ANZACS of all generations as a collection of individuals who sacrificed and whose fate touched first the lives of their families and then the life of a nation. Reading the diaries, reading the personal accounts of
war, is both enlightening and compelling and something I’d recommend. I would like to share one of those stories, of a veteran of the Somme, James Stewart. Some soldiers can be fatalistic, almost resigned to the dangers and often said that there was no point in worrying because a bullet either had your name on it or not. Jim Stewart wrote that he never worried an awful lot about the bullet with his name on it, but what always scared him and made him keep his head down were the bullets flying around, addressed: “To whom it may concern”. Aside from an important lesson in human nature, this – and everything associated with ANZAC – is human. It is real. It is people and, ultimately, it is us. All of us. It is our legacy to cherish, and to preserve.