

OXFORD AUSTRALIA
**WORD
OF THE
MONTH**

April 2011

Catafalque Party

– *noun*: a guard mounted over a catafalque during a lying in state, an Anzac service, etc., usually consisting of four sentries.

Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary 5th Edition

The story behind the Word of the Month

The first evidence we have of the term **catafalque party** is at an Anzac Day ceremony in Adelaide on 25 April 1929. It occurs in a newspaper report:

Anzac Day showed no lessening of interest in the ceremonies here to-day, when, despite rain and cold weather, thousands of persons lined the streets to watch the procession of 2500 ex-service men and 2000 members of the Australian Military Forces, which took 40 minutes to pass the saluting base at Government House. The Governor (Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven) took the salute. He was attended by the State president of the Returned Soldiers' League (Lt.-Col. McCann). The procession went to the Cross of Sacrifice, where the **catafalque party** stood with arms reversed.

The word **catafalque** (pronounced kat-uh-falk) is defined in most dictionaries this way: 'a decorated wooden framework for supporting the coffin of a distinguished person during a funeral or while lying in state'. The word comes into English from French, but goes back to an Italian word *catafalco*, of uncertain origin, but perhaps related to *scaffold*.

In Roman Catholic tradition, on All Soul's Day, or when a requiem mass is held on the anniversary of a death, and therefore occasions when there is no body present, a **catafalque** may stand in symbolic substitution for the body. Something of this tradition is evident on Anzac Day, where what is called a **catafalque** is usually a stone structure that has been designated a remembrance shrine. It is for this reason that the definition of **catafalque** has been modified in the fifth edition of the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*: 'a decorated wooden framework for supporting the coffin of a distinguished person during a funeral or while lying in state; a symbolic representation of this'.

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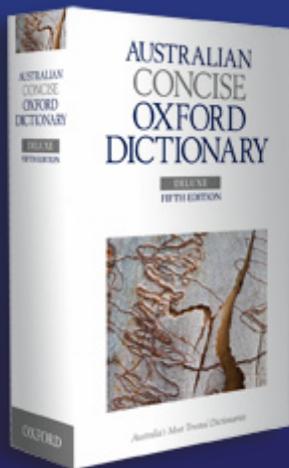
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This fifth edition of the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* also added the term **catafalque party**, and defined it: 'a guard mounted over a **catafalque** during a lying in state, an Anzac service, etc., usually consisting of four sentries'. In the distant past, when a richly decorated **catafalque** held the coffin of an important person prior to burial, there was probably a very practical reason for a guard to be mounted. The sentries are now symbolic. In the present Anzac Day ceremony (and at similar military ceremonies worldwide), the military guards hold their weapons reversed. A similar process of reversal occurs when a riderless horse in a military funeral procession has a pair of boots reversed in the stirrups. In the Anzac Day ceremony the **catafalque** is the symbolic representation of all those who have died in war, and the mounted guard attends the symbolic 'coffin' as it would an actual coffin.

While it is obvious that ceremonies of this kind are held in many countries, and while the term **catafalque party** is occasionally recorded outside Australia, research has revealed that **catafalque party** is largely an Australian term—and will be claimed as such in the *Australian National Dictionary*.