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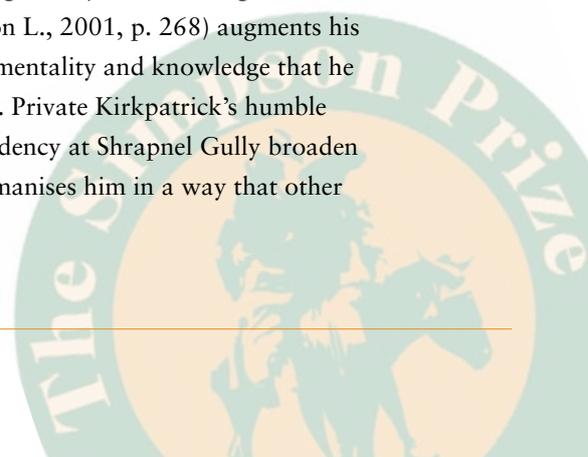
**Canberra Grammar School**

# *To what extent was Simpson a hero? How have his heroic qualities been demonstrated by other Australians since 1915?*

**by James Butterworth, Canberra Grammar School**

The deeds and values that Simpson has come to be venerated for are undoubtedly deserving of heroic treatment. But the validity of these values, and the deservedness of the particular attention and praise given to Simpson, has obscured the topic. As with any iconic figure – particularly one from what was a disastrous military campaign in Gallipoli – his proper status is shrouded in a cloud of uncertainty. But between the muddle of half-truths, lionisation and recruitment-efforts lies, at heart, the simple tale of a selfless struggle to salvage the lives of wounded Anzacs. Against truly adverse circumstances Simpson's efforts in the 24 days he spent at Anzac Cove displayed heroic qualities of courage, sacrifice and that pillar of Australian ideals that was so indelibly ingrained through Gallipoli – mateship. The qualities that Simpson is celebrated for however were forged on blood-drenched shores set against the barren, steep hills of a foreign land. And though Simpson is widely revered as an Australian hero, the standards set by his image are difficult to fulfil considering the canonisation his legend received, and the context of his actions in relation to the way of life the Anzacs were fighting to preserve. As a result of this, the rare instances of recurrence of Simpson's heroism have often been enacted by Australians in environments dissimilar to our own.

Popular culture has typically over-looked Simpson's less favourable attributes, yet these define the hero in the same sense that unbearable conditions and ultimate failure helped define the Anzac spirit. For despite the fact that he was actually English, would now be considered an illegal immigrant, and operated at Gallipoli without official sanction does not diminish Simpson's heroism at all. Instead, the story of an Englishman whose '*... heart belonged not to the sunlit plains but to the familiar grime of northern England, to his widowed mother, Sarah, and his sister, Annie*' (Carlyon L., 2001, p. 268) augments his heroic merit because of how it brings an element of sentimentality and knowledge that he died trying to save not wounded Englishmen, but Anzacs. Private Kirkpatrick's humble rank, the responsibility endowed to him, and his independency at Shrapnel Gully broaden the extent of his heroism for the simple reason that it humanises him in a way that other heroes are lacking in.



The adulation felt for Simpson amongst many Australians can be largely put down to the canonisation his image received posthumously rather than the deservedness of his status above any other ordinary Anzac soldier on the shores of Gallipoli or indeed WWI as a whole. Patrick Carlyon touches on this in *The Gallipoli Story* in which he writes in relation to Private John Kirkpatrick's rise to prominence: '*We remember Simpson's feats at Gallipoli even though there were sadder deaths and bigger tragedies. Some still lobby for Simpson to be given the Victoria Cross. Yet Simpson the legend and Simpson the man are not the same thing.*' (Carlyon P., 2003, p. 71) His transcendence into the realm of idolisation has meant that the humble heroism at the core has been twisted into a patriotic symbol to not glorify war so much as detract attention from it to almost legitimise our 'Baptism of Fire.' The extent to which this has occurred is described by Les Carlyon in his novel *Gallipoli*, where he writes of how '*Statues of him would stand outside the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne. Australians would make a film about him, put him on postage stamps, celebrate him in poetry, hold him up as an example to school children and petition for him to be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross. A sanctimonious clergyman would write his biography and leave out the unwholesome bits.*' (Carlyon L., 2001, p. 267.) Hence we see how Simpson was very much canonised so that while his actions as an Anzac may have been worthy of respect, there is an underlying element of selective focus in his transcendence.

The Anzac tradition and spirit has pervaded and enriched my own community to the extent that though the basic form of adversity has changed over time to natural disasters and the like, the response has remained unchanged over the course of time. The reincarnation can be seen in one shape or another throughout Australian society as a whole – whether the battleground be an unrelenting drought, fierce bushfires, altruism demonstrated in Japanese Prisoner of War camps, or international terrorist attacks such as the 2002 Bali Bombings. This sense of revisiting the past is succinctly explained in the Australian War Memorial website under the title 'The ANZAC spirit,' which tells of how '*Australians still invoke the ANZAC spirit in times of conflict, danger and hardship.*'(www.awm.gov.au)

It is somewhat appropriate therefore that one of the most reminiscent Australian figures of the embodiment of Simpson's heroic qualities arises from a resurgence of poor conditions in WWII by the infamous Japanese POW camps. The shocking conditions that prevailed over these camps ignited the demonstration of non-combatant war-time heroism. Edward 'Weary' Dunlop emerged as a leader in the dire situations, putting his medical skills into practice in an almost vain attempt to help seriously malnourished fellow prisoners. It is important here to note that, as the AWM frankly points out in his brief biography, that although he was '*... not the only medical officer to act in this selfless way, his name was to become a legend among Australian prisoners of war and an inspiration for their own survival.*' (www.awm.gov.au) This description readily evokes Simpson's own celebrated heroism, and is a prime example of how his heroic qualities have been displayed by other Australians in times of hardship.



The eponymous founder of the eminent Fred Hollows Foundation is an excellent example of an Australian who has demonstrated Simpson's heroic qualities of courage, altruism and egalitarianism that was so typified by the Anzac spirit. As a successful surgeon, Hollows spearheaded the advent of modern cataract surgery to lesser economically developed countries, thus helping with initiatives such as the National Trachoma and Eye Health Program to restore eyesight to thousands of people. In this way Fred Hollows showed himself a worthy idol equal even to the glorified vision of Simpson.

And so while John Simpson Kirkpatrick was certainly heroic, he was overly canonised to the extent that his true nature has been retold to suit the needs of the promotion of a unique Australian identity. Outside the context of war and poverty, living up to the iconic Simpson standards is a difficult task. This, coupled with the decreased amount of lionisation of more modern potential heroic figures such as any one fireman or simple everyday battler fighting the drought, has limited the number of Australians held in the same reverent light as Simpson.

## **Bibliography**

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