



**The**

*a competition for*

**Simpson**

*year 9 and 10 students*

**Prize**

**2008 winner**  
**New South Wales**

**Emma Campbell**  
***Frensham School***

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

**by Emma Campbell, Frensham School**

The process that began in Australia after 19 May 1915, when John Simpson Kirkpatrick was killed, saw him 'beatified, then canonised' (Carlyon 2002, p. 267). The Man with the Donkey became the iconic and evolving symbol of the Dardanelles campaign because, 'out of the thousands who did heroic things at Gallipoli, he would be the chosen one' (2002, p. 267).

Just a week after the outbreak of war Simpson jumped ship in Fremantle to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F). He landed at Gallipoli with the 3rd Field Ambulance. Simpson survived a mere twenty-four days on the battlefield however, after his death, he became the most famous, consummate and enduring hero of Gallipoli.

The extent to which Simpson was regarded as a hero during W.W.I was commended by several facts which were favourably regarded by the conservative press, politicians and prominent Imperialists like Miss Robertson, Secretary-General of the Red Cross, who, 'nearly two decades later championed the appeal for a monument to Simpson at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne' (Cochrane 1992, p. 87). Simpson was a volunteer, he made his commitment to the 'cause' promptly, was part of the initial Gallipoli landings and, as a stretcher-bearer, was involved in supporting the gallant fighters who endured the 'baptism by fire' widely acclaimed as the finest action of the newly federated nation. The saviour of wounded soldiers, a potent, Christ-like figure, was the ideal embodied by the heroic Simpson (Cochrane 1992, p. 236).

'The image of the Man with the Donkey – the unflinching stretcher-bearer, wearing the Red Cross brassard and leading a wounded soldier out of danger – was a powerful image of salvation' (Cochrane 1992, p. 88). In wartime Australia 'it was also an image that united disparate social forces behind a common imperial purpose: the red cross signifying the needs of soldiers, and especially the wounded, expressing both commitment in battle and the vast mobilisation of people, across lines of sex, class and faith, on the increasingly dissent-torn home front' (1992, p. 88).

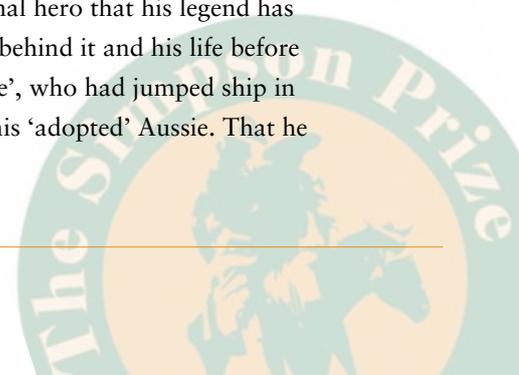


The degree to which Simpson's story was manipulated to support the enlistment debate and referenda on conscription, and used by others to secure a place for themselves as part of the developing legend (Cochrane 1992 p.47-48), is significant. However, revised interpretations of his military service and versions of Simpson's life – for forty years he was actually believed to be an Australian – are ultimately irrelevant to his heroic status. Whatever the real truth behind the Legend, Simpson is perceived and acknowledged as a hero because his reaction to circumstances at Gallipoli established that he was courageous, resourceful, independent, compassionate and selfless. The qualities he displayed in support of his comrades in arms, while certainly not unique or even overwhelmingly outstanding, were heroic.

Simpson gains credibility as a hero precisely because his actions represented the valour of many who served with the first A.I.F (Cochrane 1992). His tragic, untimely death, aged twenty-two, further enhanced his heroism; he had made the supreme sacrifice. The high ideals identified as underpinning his personal qualities, as exhibited under horrific battlefield conditions, have been recognised and readapted since 1915 to become a yardstick against which society measures the deeds of citizens; including defence personnel.

The Governor-General, a former distinguished Special Services soldier himself, presented the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (Commando) with a Unit Citation, 'for acts of extraordinary gallantry in action in Afghanistan from 25 August 2005 to 2 September 2006' (His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffrey AC CVO MC Governor General of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), at Holsworthy Barracks, NSW, on 26 October 2007. General Jeffrey outlined their 374 day deployment – 309 days in the field, over 100 missions resulting in 139 combat engagements, in operational conditions equal to the most difficult Australians have ever faced – and the personal traits of the award recipients as, 'including high intelligence, initiative to a marked degree, physical and moral courage, superb fitness, personal and group discipline, composure under pressure, and an unceasing desire to find more effective and efficient ways of carrying out diverse tasks in a wide variety of operational situations.' He said: 'in these conditions, the operations of 4RAR(Cdo) along with its sister unit the Special Air Services Regiment, were innovative, courageous and successful,' and he specifically mentioned, 'the medics who provided such splendid primary medical care to the wounded, at times under heavy fire.' The Governor General concluded that such 'exemplary service brings great credit on the men and women of 4RAR(Cdo), the Australian Army and the nation as a whole.' Courage, resourcefulness, compassion and selfless dedication to duty, qualities attributed to Simpson at Gallipoli, are still recognised as ideals for military personnel. Evidence of these qualities of service continues to earn praise from the wider community.

The stretcher-bearer with his donkey had such status as a national hero that his legend has survived investigations into questionable details about the man behind it and his life before enlistment. The realisation that Simpson was actually a 'Geordie', who had jumped ship in Newcastle, NSW, in 1910, has not diminished admiration for this 'adopted' Aussie. That he



spent four years as an itinerant worker before volunteering under the misguided assumption that enlistment would secure him a free passage home to England has only furthered Simpson's acceptance as a true larrikin and a modest, reluctant hero.

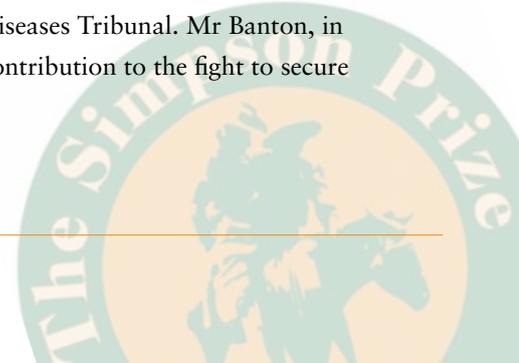
In a similar manner the survivors of the Tasmanian Beaconsfield mine disaster, Todd Russell and Brant Webb, found themselves thrust into the media spotlight, as reluctant heroes, after their dramatic rescue. Their endurance, determination and courage in the face of adversity brought them public acclaim in a manner similar to the attention paid to Simpson. Modesty, praise of their rescuers and the mateship they share, couched in deprecating humour, are quantities featured through their ordeal (Wright 2006).

Private Simpson, somewhat of a loner, preferred to operate independently and he showed his initiative by 'requisitioning' a donkey to rescue slightly wounded soldiers. Contemporary records (Cochrane 1992 p.43 & p.251), reveal Number 202, Pte. Simpson was twice noted in the War Diary of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance however, it is apparent that only those men in the area around Shrapnel Gully where he worked initially knew of him (Cochrane 1992).

C. E. W Bean, the official war correspondent began the embellishment of the story of the Man with the Donkey by saying 'everybody' knew Simpson. When Bean introduced Simpson to the public in his dispatch of 12 June 1915 (Cochrane 1992 p. 50) he had previously noted neither Simpson, his deeds, nor his death, almost a month previously. Simpson's work was typical of Field Ambulance personnel, however; a distant civilian audience desperate for heroes and a Government seeking the means to boost recruitment willingly embraced Simpson and calls began to secure a posthumous bravery award for him. When his story returned to Gallipoli it had already been magnified; the hero status accorded to Simpson increased at the front and continued to expand at home.

A minute's silence, for the man who became the public face of asbestos victims, Bernie Banton, was held in the New South Wales parliament on the day he died, 27 November 2007. This is an example of recognition, tribute and sentiment reminiscent of the Simpson legend. Premier Morris Iemma said, 'It was his (Mr Banton's) transparent courage, his obvious suffering and his imminent mortality that brought him to the affections of so many. It gave his campaign the moral firepower that alone could humble a corporate giant' (ABC News 2007).

Mr. Banton, a former employee of James Hardie's Camellia plant, was a long-term sufferer of three serious conditions caused by exposure to asbestos. His compensation claim was settled in 2000 however; he continued as a determined, compassionate and selfless campaigner to secure justice for other victims. 'Mr Banton had been compensated for asbestosis and won his final victory against the company a week before his death, when the company settled a second claim over his mesothelioma on November 22' (ABC News 2007), following evidence he courageously gave from his hospital bed to the NSW Dust Diseases Tribunal. Mr Banton, in losing his final life-battle, gained a hero's recognition for his contribution to the fight to secure compensation for all victims.



The press popularised Gallipoli heroes (Cochrane 1992 p. 53) and they play a significant role in determining heroes today. The day Simpson was shot was, perhaps ironically; the same day Lance Corporal Albert Jacka won the first Victoria Cross awarded to an Australian for significant military action at Gallipoli. Charles Bean referred to Jacka as 'the man who performed the most dramatic and effective act of individual audacity in the history of the AIF' (Board of Studies NSW 2007) yet as attitudes to war changed during the twentieth century the pre-eminent status of WWI's military heroes was revised. Through this process Simpson's heroic position was further exalted:

'In 1930, the date 19 May 1915 was more widely recognised as the day Albert Jacka won the VC than the day of Simpson's death. By 1960 Jacka and many other heroes were all but forgotten, yet elementary schooling had ensured that Simpson's epic deeds were as widely known as they had been during the Great War' (Cochrane, 1992 p 231).

As a non-combatant Simpson continues to be lauded for bravery, celebrated as an irrepressible spirit and acknowledged as a complete hero for giving his life in the service of others. Simpson's actions are regarded as a penultimate expression of the ideal of mateship. Undoubtedly, regard for others is the greatest quality Simpson shares with the men and women of 4RAR (Cdo), the Beaconsfield heroes and selfless advocates like Bernie Banton.

Simpson faced death with resourceful independence, compassion and selfless courage. The extent to which he is regarded as a hero depends on the quantum of these personal qualities – virtues still extolled by contemporary society – and acceptance of his story. Nationally, immortalised in bronze outside the Australian War Memorial, with his donkey bearing a wounded ANZAC, Simpson remains the universal, ultimate, unparalleled hero.

## References

### *Books*

Carlton, L. 2001 (reprinted 2002), *Gallipoli*, Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd., Sydney.

Cochrane, P. 1992, *Simpson and the Donkey: The Making of a Legend*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Victoria.

Wright, T. 2006, *Bad Ground*, Pier 9, Sydney.

### *Websites*

ABC News. 'NSW Parliament honours Bernie Banton,' ABC News (Online), <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/27/2102847.htm>>, viewed 3 December 2007.

ABC News. 'Obituary: Banton the public face of asbestos fight,' ABC News (Online), <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/27/2101964.htm>>, viewed 3 December 2007.

ABC News. 'Bedside hearing set for Banton compo bid,' ABC News (Online), <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/27/2096425.htm>>, viewed 3 December 2007.

ABC News. 'Bid to strike out Banton compensation claim fails,' ABC News (Online), <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/20/2096058.htm>>, viewed 3 December 2007.



Birnbauer, W. 2004, 'James Hardie finally agrees on payout for asbestos victims,' *The Sun-Herald*, 19 December, viewed 3 December 2007, <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/James-Hardie-finally-agrees-on-payout-for-asbest>>.

Board of Studies NSW, 'Bravery Awards at Gallipoli,' Department of Veterans' Affairs (Online), <<http://www.anzacsite.gov.au/5environment/vc/jakka.html>>, viewed 10 December 2007.

Jeffrey, M. 'Presentation of the Unit Citation for Gallantry to 4RAR (Commando)', Address by His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffrey at Holsworthy Army Barracks,' (Online) <<http://www.gg.gov.au/governorgeneral/speech.php?id=292>>, viewed 10 December 2007.

### **Bibliography**

*Consulted works include all those in 'Reference List,' as well as the following:*

Adam-Smith, P. 1991, *The Anzacs*, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria.

Brennan, B. 'A Doctor's View of Gallipoli Landings,' *Australians at War* (Online), <<http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au/stories/stories.asp?war=W1&id=175>>, viewed 4 December 2007.

Cooper, J. 1982, *Animals in War*, William Heinemann Ltd., London.

King, J. & Bowers, M. 2005, *Gallipoli: Untold stories from war correspondent Charles Bean and front-line Anzacs*, Doubleday, Australia.

*The Boys Who Came Home – Recollections of Gallipoli* (Videorecording) 2000, ABC, Sydney.

