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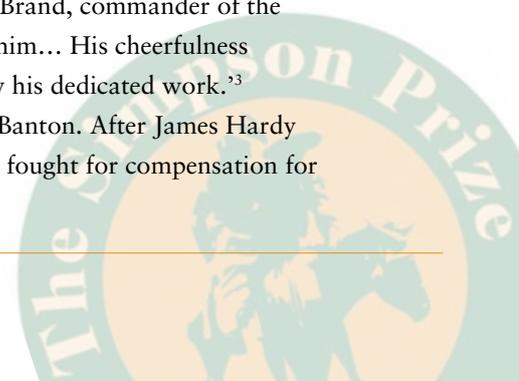
To what extent was Simpson a hero? How have his heroic qualities been demonstrated by other Australians since 1915?

by Elizabeth Carroll-Shaw, Walford Anglican School for Girls

Australians remember Gallipoli proudly as the birthplace of the ANZAC tradition, which has come to mean victory against overwhelming odds. Landed in the wrong place, the bravery and determination of the Australian Forces were tested by the campaign. Unorganised and poorly trained, they were in an inferior position to the enemy. Yet John Simpson Kirkpatrick, iconic figure of Gallipoli, was able to remain positive and demonstrate the extraordinary qualities of courage, compassion, dedication, innovation and perseverance when faced with these bleak conditions.

Simpson was a simple stretcher-bearer, who, through his heroic conduct, won the admiration of a nation and became a symbol of the ANZAC spirit. Private Simpson and the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance landed at ANZAC Cove on April 25th 1914. C.E.W. Bean records that on this day Simpson found a donkey abandoned by the Turks and decided to use it to carry wounded men from Monash Valley to ANZAC Cove. He performed this task each day and half of each night up until his death a month later, on May 19th. One of the most significant contributions Simpson made to the campaign was the number of wounded he saved while facing great danger. There are, however, some who argue that Simpson was not a hero but a man performing a job. General John Monash, in a letter to the Australian Headquarters in 1915, wrote, 'Simpson knew no fear, and moved unconcernedly amid shrapnel and rifle-fire, steadily carrying out his self-imposed task day by day.'¹ This establishes that Simpson had appointed himself the task of saving the wounded, and that the risks he took, which were far beyond the call of duty, were his choice. C.E.W. Bean commented, 'Simpson escaped death so many times that he was completely fatalistic.'²

Arriving on the first day of the campaign, Simpson realized how desperate the situation was. Simpson, however, had a gift for staying positive in the face of opposition, and this attitude inspired the men around him to keep fighting. General Brand, commander of the 3rd Brigade, said of Simpson, 'Almost every digger knew about him... His cheerfulness and courage made a profound impression on everyone who saw his dedicated work.'³ Another inspirational Australian with a similar gift was Bernie Banton. After James Hardy knowingly exposed employees to asbestos in the 1970s, Banton fought for compensation for



himself and his fellow workers. Facing a long and difficult battle, first against James Hardy and then against mesophelioma Banton, like Simpson, never stopped fighting. Karen Banton said, 'The 'never take no for an answer' attitude of Bernie Banton brings hope nationally, and globally, that good will always triumph over evil.'⁴ This attitude inspired the nation and ensures Simpson and Banton are recognised as heroes for their perseverance and their ability to motivate their fellow Australians.

Angered by the desperate conditions of the campaign, Simpson wanted to fight the injustice of the situation the Australians had been thrust into. Unlike many men, he did not simply complain about the unfairness of the circumstances the troops faced. Instead, he contributed to the campaign; saving lives and inspiring the men to keep going. Eddie Koiki Mabo felt the desire to fight injustice just as passionately. Mabo challenged the Australian Government to recognise the land claims of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He fought to prove his claim to Murray Island from 1983 until the High Court's ruling in 1993, which established that Indigenous Australians had a right to their traditional lands. As Trevor Graham commented, 'Mabo now stood for a case, a cause, an issue, a problem, a bone of contention and an issue to chew on.'⁵ Australians admire Simpson and Mabo as heroes because they fought injustice. Today, Simpson symbolises the courage of Gallipoli, while Mabo signifies the unfairness of terra nullius.

The innovative and unorthodox use of a donkey in place of an ambulance stretcher earned Simpson the acclaim of the Australian forces at Gallipoli. Military convention dictated that two stretcher-bearers carry a wounded soldier to safety. However, Simpson's enterprising idea of using a donkey to transport wounded soldiers meant that one man could assist two soldiers at one time. In the 1930s Australian nurse Elizabeth Kenny also came up with an inventive solution to a serious issue facing doctors. Though untrained, Kenny developed a method of treating cerebral palsy and poliomyelitis patients by applying hot packs to treat muscle spasms instead of the accepted practice of strapping their limbs. With a fresh way of looking at problems and a pragmatic attitude to finding solutions, Simpson and Kenny improved conditions for the people they were helping. Their refusal to let criticism prevent them from succeeding is truly heroic.

Despite the appalling state of the campaign, Simpson remained dedicated to his task. General John Monash established, '[He] had become separated from his own unit, and had carried on his perilous work on his own initiative.'⁶ Simpson must have possessed great self-discipline and will power to work in the terrible conditions at Gallipoli. Another Australian who has shown the same degree of dedication is Ian Frazer, who spent twenty years developing a cervical cancer vaccine. Both men stuck with their task until completion, disregarding the difficulties or discomfort involved. These men also felt that they had a moral duty to help others. Caroline Frazer explains, '[Ian Frazer] wants to improve people's lives... It's always been part of what he wanted to do.'⁷ Simpson and Frazer were both able to look beyond their own lives to see the issues other people faced and find solutions, demonstrating the two heroic qualities of compassion and empathy.



Today, some people question the extent to which Simpson was a hero. As Les Carlyon commented in his oration at the Australian War Memorial in 2004, '[Simpson] was a brave man who performed selfless acts. But... there were larger heroes on Gallipoli, dozens and dozens of them.'⁸ It is true that Simpson did not ultimately make a significant contribution to the outcome of the Gallipoli campaign. He was not an officer who led the men to victory, or a soldier who took part in an important battle. Instead, Simpson fulfilled a role that may have been even more important. He made a quiet but vital contribution to the campaign, keeping up the men's morale and inspiring them to keep fighting. Les Carlyon may have queried why Simpson has become the symbol of Gallipoli, but he has also written, 'Simpson made the war look nobler than it was.'⁹ It is Simpson's nobility that inspires Australians - his consideration of those around him, his perseverance in a harsh situation, his motivation of his fellow soldiers. In part, Simpson was responsible for the birth of the ANZAC spirit. His brave and noble conduct motivated the soldiers at Gallipoli to continue fighting after his death and continues to inspire Australians today to fight injustice and persevere to achieve their goals, no matter how great the odds.

Endnotes

1. General John Monash, letter to HQ N.Z. & A. Division, 20 May 1915
2. Bean, C.E.W. (1921) *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*. Vol. I, Angus and Robertson, Sydney
3. Holt, T and V (2000) *Major and Mrs. Holts Battlefield Guide*, Pen and Swords Books Ltd, South Yorkshire
4. Bernie Banton's Funeral eulogy, 5 December 2007
5. Graham, Trevor (1997) *Mabo: Life of an Island Man* [DVD], Film Australia, Sydney
6. General John Monash, letter to HQ N.Z. & A. Division, 20 May 1915
7. The Australian of the Year Award. (2006) National Australia Day Council, Australia, <www.australianoftheyear.gov.au/> (viewed 7 December 2007)
8. Australian War Memorial Anniversary Oration by Les Carlyon, 11 November 2004
9. Carlyon, Les (2001) *Gallipoli*, Pan Macmillian, Sydney, Australia



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