



The

a competition for

Simpson

year 9 and 10 students

Prize

**2008 runner-up
Queensland**

**Stephanie Ferguson
Saint Stephen's College**

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

by Stephanie Ferguson, Saint Stephen's College

John Kirkpatrick Simpson is arguably the most famous war hero in Australian history. He was not born in Australia but he is embraced as an Australian hero, because he exemplifies the values important to Australians. Simpson saved the lives of so many soldiers at Gallipoli not because he wanted to be famous but because he knew it was the right thing to do. Andrew Sayers, Director of the National Portrait Gallery, supports this humility, 'That's an important part of the Australian ethos that some people may end up being heroes, but they didn't actually start out wanting necessarily to be heroes,' (*Sunday Spectrum* 2001 p. 2). The Australian public admire ordinary people who are just trying to do the right thing. Simpson's countless admirable qualities – which include determination, mateship, fierce independence and optimism – have influenced and motivated Australians for over ninety years. Australians such as Bernard O'Reilly and Tania Major have exhibited these meritorious qualities every day since, continuing to uphold both the Australian and ANZAC spirit so tragically and heroically forged at Gallipoli.

Born into a loving but penniless household, Simpson grew up with an unusual love for animals, donkeys and horses in particular (*Convictcreations.com* 1999 p. 1). This proved to be beneficial when, in 1915, Simpson found himself enlisted in the AIF and stationed as a stretcher bearer in Gallipoli. Shortly after arriving in Gallipoli, Simpson found a donkey and began using him to transport the injured back to safety (*Convictcreations.com* 1999 p. 1). Although mortally wounded himself after twenty-four days, his legend has continued to grow stronger and inspire others to show similar characteristics.

Simpson's attachment to Australia bears little resemblance to what he was later to represent to Australians. Having spent only a few years in Australia before enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force, Simpson is not the typical born and bred Australian that most people think he is (*Convictcreations.com* 1999 p. 1). An online biography of Simpson mentions of his enlistment in the AIF, 'There was nothing patriotic in his motivations... by joining, he believed that he could get a free passage home,' (*Convictcreations.com* 1999 p. 1). This skeptical view of Simpson's army enrollment is in fact completely inaccurate. On Christmas Day, 1914 Simpson wrote in a letter to his mother, 'I would not have joined this contingent

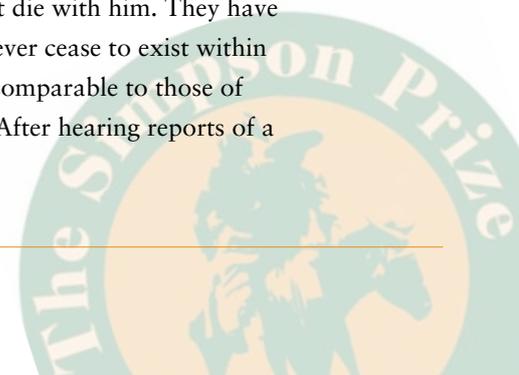


if I had known that they were not going to England. I would have taken the trip home and had a holiday at home then joined the army at home and went to the front,' (cited *Australian War Memorial* 2007 p.1). This clearly indicates that although, understandably, he did long to reunite with his beloved mother and sister, Simpson genuinely did want to go to Gallipoli to fight for Australia and Britain, and was not merely taking advantage of a free journey back to England.

From the time Simpson arrived at ANZAC Cove just prior to dawn on the 25th of April, he was saving lives. Aware of how important each soldier was, Simpson made the decision to place the lives of the men fighting for his country above his own. This notion of self-sacrifice and determination to help others was observed and admired by not only the ANZAC soldiers and medics, but also by the Indian soldiers at Gallipoli. They provided Simpson with a camp and food for his donkey between rescues, and they affectionately called him 'Bahadur', or 'Bravest of the Brave' (Benson 2006 p. 5). When news of his death spread throughout ANZAC Cove, they reacted with such intense emotion that the Australian and British soldiers were astounded. Sapper F. D. Burrell served with the Signals Engineers of the First Light Horse along Shrapnel Gully and once stated, 'I never seen them show such sorrow for one of their own,' (Benson 2006 p. 5). Simpson possessed such a character that all who met him were instantly drawn towards his larrikinism and cheerful nature. These particular aspects played a key role in the manner in which Simpson performed his duties, and were the most memorable factors about him.

Posthumously, Simpson has faced much criticism over his remarkably unfaltering reputation in the minds of Australians, with critics claiming that many of the values and actions shown by Simpson have been exaggerated in the time since his death. However, he has received his highest acclamations not from the Australian public but from his fellow diggers and commanding officers. Padre George Green, a chaplain stationed at Gallipoli who led Simpson's burial service, declared, 'If ever a man deserved a Victoria Cross, it was Simpson. I often remember now the scene I saw frequently in Shrapnel Gully of that cheerful soul calmly walking down the gully with a Red Cross armlet tied round the donkey's head,' (Benson 2006 p. 5). General John Monash, of the 4th A.I. Brigade, also felt that Simpson deserved recognition, and notified Headquarters of Simpson's courageous actions in a letter dated 20 May, 1915. He wrote, 'I desire to bring under special notice... the case of Private Simpson... Private Simpson and his little beast earned the admiration of everyone at the upper end of the valley,' (cited *Australian War Memorial* 2007 p. 1). These people, the men who watched in awe as he and his donkey walked placidly through heavy gunfire to assist yet another injured soldier, would know the extent of Simpson's heroism much more intimately than those not witness to his incredible actions.

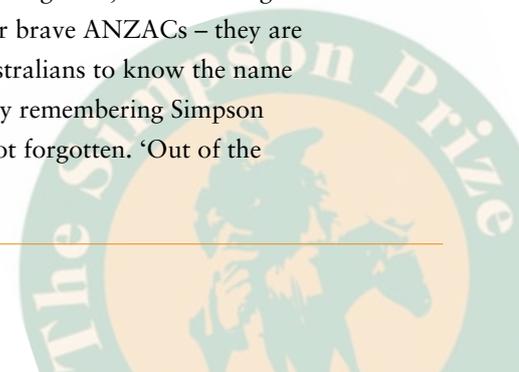
Fortunately, when Simpson passed away, his noble traits did not die with him. They have persevered with every new generation of Australians and will never cease to exist within Australia. Another Australian who has demonstrated qualities comparable to those of Simpson was Bernard O'Reilly, a humble Australian bushman. After hearing reports of a



missing plane flying over nearby thick rainforest in 1937, O'Reilly took it upon himself to venture alone for over sixteen kilometres to recover any survivors from the wreck. He eventually found two survivors, a week after the plane was reported missing. He refused to rest however, instead insisting on leading a rescue party back down the entire track to the crash site (Wade Iedema n.d. p. 1). He is similar to Simpson in that neither of the courageous men liked to be praised or rewarded for their efforts. After being offered a gold sovereign for rescuing an officer, Simpson replied, 'Keep yer bliddy quid. I'm not deein' this for the money,' (cited Curran 1998 p. 4). O'Reilly also avoided the celebrations for his actions. His daughter Rhelma Kenny once explained in an interview, 'People used to tell my dad he was a hero but he thought that was quite wrong. It was just a job that needed doing and he happened to be the person with the knowledge to do it,' (Craig Allen 2007). Both of these men are incredible heroes, with O'Reilly epitomizing all the positive qualities demonstrated by Simpson at Gallipoli.

More recently, a young Indigenous Australian has captured the essence of the spirit of Simpson. The same self-sacrifice and persistence displayed over ninety years ago by Simpson are also the qualities exhibited by Tania Major. Born into a disadvantaged Indigenous community, Tania has devoted her life to raising awareness of issues facing Aboriginal youth. The youngest ever member to be elected to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Tania has 'used her profile to draw attention to domestic violence in the Aboriginal community' and like Simpson she is a role model for thousands of young Australians (Hill-Douglas 2007 p. 1). Sakirrah Turpin, a young girl mentored by Tania declared, 'Everyone just wants to be like Tania,' (cited *National Australia Day Council* 2007). Tania provides hope to all the young Indigenous people of Australia who once felt that they had no one to understand them. She lives with the belief that all children deserve the highest education possible, and once stated, 'How can the education offered to our young people be justified? Education should be uplifting, not serve to reinforce lack of self-esteem and the heart-rending low expectations that my mob suffer,' (Tania Major 2003 p. 2). By persisting for such a worthy cause, taking initiative and bravely being fiercely independent, Tania is honouring the Australian reputation forged by Simpson ninety years ago.

Simpson and his donkey are the iconic heroes of Australia – they represent all values that Australians strive to uphold. Petro Georgiou, member of the Australian Liberal Party, stated in a speech earlier this year, 'A number of my colleagues have chanced their arms on what it means to be an Australian... a third has put forward Simpson (and his donkey) as 'everything that is at the heart of what it means to be Australian,' (Petro Georgiou 2007). Although an 'unlikely figure to become a national hero,' Simpson epitomized all that Australians aspire to become (*Australian War Memorial* 2005 p. 1). Although some critics claim that in remembering Simpson other more worthy men are forgotten, in celebrating Simpson so extensively Australians are not ignoring all the other brave ANZACs – they are in fact doing the complete opposite. It is not possible for all Australians to know the name of every man who acted bravely while fighting at Gallipoli, so by remembering Simpson the Australian public is ensuring that our ANZAC heroes are not forgotten. 'Out of the



thousands who did heroic things at Gallipoli, he would be the chosen one,' (Carlyon 2001 p. 267). His qualities have been emulated by other Australians since 1915, by the likes of Bernard O'Reilly and Tania Major. All three of these heroes have one major theme in common – none of them set out to be heroes. They just saw a job that needed doing, and decided that they should be the ones to do it.

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