



The

a competition for

Simpson

year 9 and 10 students

Prize

**2008 runner-up
Western Australia**

**Brady Inman
Scotch College**

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

by Brady Inman, Scotch College

Simpson: is his heroic status justified?

John Simpson-Kirkpatrick is an Australian legend; he is the most renowned hero of the ANZACs. His story has been taught to generations of Australians, but like all stories, it has changed over time. It is essential to look beyond the façade that has faithfully preserved the legend of Simpson and his donkey to conclude as to whether he was a true hero in the



spirit of the ANZAC legend. It may be the case that the story of Simpson has been embellished by Australian folklore over the years. Furthermore, there have been numerous other Australians who have excelled in a vast range of areas who can rightfully claim the title of 'hero'. A hero does not need to be someone who has been constructed by the media or propagated through other mediums. Many Australians have proven themselves on other 'battlefields', such as the expansive Australian coastal waters as well as the harsh outback which is subject to periodic fires. As a nation, it is necessary to look beyond the famous heroes, and look

at our everyday heroes like the volunteer surf lifesavers who have saved countless lives, or the firefighters who have saved people homes and livelihoods.

John Simpson Kirkpatrick is known as an Australian hero; he is one of the best known soldiers to serve in the Australian imperial force, even though he was not an armed soldier or even Australian. Simpson was born in 1892, in South Shields, England. The son of a Scottish couple who had moved to England in 1886, Simpson left home in 1909 beginning work as a stocker and steward on merchant ships. One year later, he jumped ship in Australia, and found work as a coal miner. He moved between ships, finding work wherever he could. Simpson was later a stretcher bearer for the ANZACs in Gallipoli during World War One. He landed at ANZAC cove on April 25 1915, and beginning on that first night he took a donkey and would carry the wounded from the front line to the beach for evacuation.¹ He worked under constant fire, for three and a half weeks until he was shot dead on one of his trips. Australians today see Simpson as one of the great ANZAC legends.



The commonly believed story of Simpson is that he arrived in Gallipoli and was the only one of his battalion to arrive on the beach unscathed, so instead of following orders he began to work as an independent unit. At Gallipoli Simpson employed the services of a donkey that had arrived on one of the ships to transport the wounded from the front line to the beach for evacuation². However, it is without a doubt that this story has been glorified and embellished; numerous writers and historians such as C.E.W Bean have tailored this story to suit the legend of the first ever ANZACs who fought gallantly against all odds at Gallipoli in 1915.

What Australians either ignore or choose not to believe is the story that is closer to the truth. In this version Simpson disbarred himself from his unit and instead found an easier task where he was his own boss. The task he chose was to use a donkey to transport slightly wounded soldiers from the front line to the beach employing the services of a donkey: this task was far easier. As Wilson notes:

much has been said about the perils and dangers of his job, but his chosen task was much safer than his assigned duty of a stretcher bearer. Simpson was a stretcher bearer, not a donkey driver, and the only people he could carry on his donkey, were slightly wounded soldiers who were capable of walking down themselves.³

Any seriously wounded men would have been unable to ride on the donkey because they would not have been able to support themselves on the donkey correctly. If Simpson was a true hero he would have been doing the duties he was assigned, working with the stretcher bearer unit. The stretcher bearer unit that he worked with would have been short one man which would have made their work much harder.⁴

All the stories of Simpson talk of how brave he must have been, walking up and down Shrapnel and Monash gully under constant enemy fire. These stories literally make out that Simpson must have been the only man doing this courageous task. However, this is not the truth. The two gullies were like busy highways; there would have been hundreds of men taking the routes at any given time, so in fact Simpson was no braver than any other man who was involved in the Gallipoli assault. The truth is that he was a British subject who was in Australia at the time when war started; he wanted to enlist because it was thought that his regiment would do training in England. Instead they went to Egypt and then headed straight to Gallipoli. Once at Gallipoli, he showed no more bravery or courage than any other ANZAC who fought to save 'King and Country'⁵.

The Australian nation is a proud country, who has had many heroes over its short history. Since 1915, there have been prominent heroes in every generation. To be a hero is not an easy thing; one needs to be utterly selfless, determined, courageous and gallant⁶. The ANZACs are Australian heroes; their heroism was proved countless times by their efforts on the battlefield. It was proven by their courage, compassion, comradeship, endurance, selflessness, resourcefulness, independence and initiative. These were the qualities that made them heroes, but their larrikinism and humour made them not only an Australian legend, but world renowned. Subsequently, every ANZAC who served during the First World War deserves to be as widely celebrated as Simpson has been.



There are many heroes in the military and sporting world, but the true Australian heroes are often overlooked. To discover the real heroes of Australia one needs to look beyond the archetypal heroes perpetuated through the media. The true heroes are the everyday 'Aussie battlers'. The firefighters of Australia are true heroes; they embody the skills and attributes of the ANZAC legend as they courageously put their lives at risk to save lives and peoples homes and livelihoods. The surf lifesavers that patrol Australian beaches can not be forgotten; they also have earned an iconic position in Australian hearts that is almost as great as the ANZAC legend itself. The lifesavers of Australia are a major part of our culture and tradition; they protect our beaches with selfless perseverance, and a courageous attitude. Their presence has a major impact on our beaches, they are there to serve and protect, and their efforts have saved countless lives.⁷

John Simpson-Kirkpatrick was an ANZAC, he demonstrated the attributes of heroism and bravery, but he was just like any other soldier on the Gallipoli battlefield. All soldiers of the Gallipoli offensive are just as deserving of his iconic status. Simpson showed courage and bravery, but he also defied orders and disadvantaged his unit and the seriously wounded. Since 1915 there have been countless Australians who have embodied the attributes of the ANZAC legend. The heroes of today are not just the heroes that the media has constructed, but they are the real 'Aussie battlers' like the fire fighters and surf lifesavers who put their own lives on the line in the face of adversity to help and protect their 'mates'.

Endnotes

1. Wikipedia, 'John Simpson Kirkpatrick', <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Simpson_Kirkpatrick>, viewed 2 December 2007.
2. Australian War Memorial, 'First World War 1914-18', <<http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww1.htm>>, viewed 5 December 2007.
3. Wilson, G., 'The Donkey Vote. A VC for Simpson – The Case Against', *Sabretache: The Journal and Proceedings of the Military Historical Society of Australia*, p. 26.
4. Ibid.
5. Bantick, C., 'The hero with a gun or the one with a donkey?', *The Age*, 24 April 2005.
6. Mesa Community College, 'Portrait of a Hero', <<http://www.mc.maricopa.edu/dept/d46/psy/dev/Fall01/hero/qualities.html>>, viewed 6 December 2007.
7. Australian Government Culture and Recreation, 'Natural disasters', <<http://www.cultureandrecreation.gov.au/articles/naturaldisasters/>>, viewed 3 December 2007.

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Photography

Photograph on page 1 was taken from <http://www.ANZACsite.gov.au/1landing/images/large/ch1_2-2lc.jpg>, viewed 5 December 2007.

