



The

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Simpson

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2008 winner
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To what extent was Simpson a hero? How have his heroic qualities been demonstrated by other Australians since 1915?

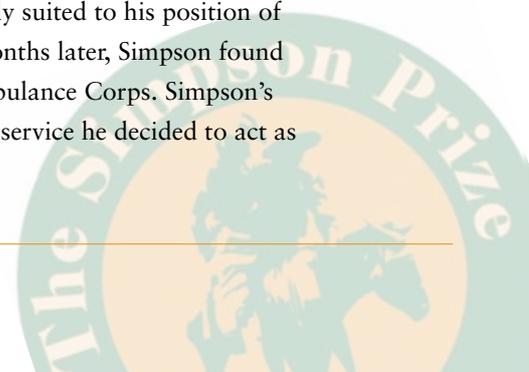
by Oliver Kersnovski, Kingaroy State High School

John Simpson Kirkpatrick was a man of questionable character, successful at nothing, motivated by selfishness, who enlisted in the Australian Infantry Force hoping to desert when he landed on English soil. His lasting fame arises from just twenty-five days of active service. How can a man of such character become a national hero?

To answer this question it is important to look at the dictionary meaning of a hero, defined as one who, 'when faced with danger and adversity, from a position of weakness, displays courage and the willingness for self sacrifice' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2007). The sense of a 'national hero' is shaped then by a nation's spirit and ideals, the peoples' social and cultural understanding and the circumstances of the times. Our nation's ideas of a hero are shaped by knowledge of our great country, its history and its character and by the values and beliefs, that as a nation, we profess. The Australian concept of a hero is significantly different from that of other countries: our national identity being founded on the belief in equality of mankind, in mateship and in rebellion against authority.

John Simpson Kirkpatrick was an unremarkable man. Having deserted from the merchant navy in 1910 he tramped around Australia working a variety of jobs. He worked mostly at sea on Australian coastal shipping vessels. He tried cane cutting and horse mounted stock work in north Queensland lasting in each case for just one week – the heat and humidity overwhelming him easily (*The Medical Journal of Australia*, 13 Mar 2003). He led a knockabout life with little conviction to achieve. He jumped ship when it suited him and enjoyed a raucous lifestyle and was not averse to drunken brawls.

His enlistment in the AIF (Australian Imperial Forces) was for selfish reasons, Simpson expecting that his enlistment would get him back to England and the home he had missed for all the years he was away from it. But fate intervened and 'the AIF was diverted to Egypt,...where his natural strength and fitness made him ideally suited to his position of Field Ambulance stretcher bearer.' (Convict Creations) Just months later, Simpson found himself on the shores of Gallipoli, in a much understaffed Ambulance Corps. Simpson's independent spirit kicked in and from his second day in active service he decided to act as



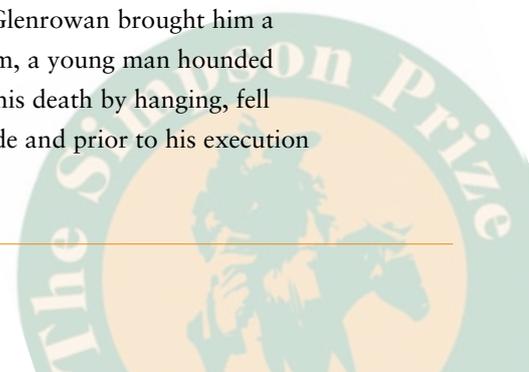
an independent unit. 'He bivouacked with his donkey at the 21st Kohat Indian Mountain Artillery Battery who nicknamed Simpson 'Bahadur' – the bravest of the brave'. (Convict Creations) He failed to report back to his ambulance headquarters, 'thumbing his nose' at the authorities and technically making himself a deserter. 'The refusal to report to his own field ambulance post was a direct affront to his Commanding Officer's ego, not to mention consideration of military tradition, etiquette and discipline.' (Convict Creations)

On the surface, 'Simpson displayed none of the qualities of a good soldier' (Anzac House, 14 Oct 2005), much less a national hero. He had a temperament unsuited to army discipline. In fact, 'he strongly disliked discipline; he shirked the drudgery and repetition of drills and other military tasks, disregarded orders and was recklessly independent'. (Anzac House, 14 Oct 2005) He was not a patriot nor was he an idealist; but he was a humanist with a warm heart, a witty independent spirit and a careless larrikinism. His gregarious personality found favour with his fellow soldiers at Gallipoli. This witty, joke-cracking, cheerful digger had a kind word and a friendly smile for all. He was courageous, fearless and inspirational, singing and clowning in the face of danger. His optimistic spirit and larrikin character became the symbol of all that was pure, selfless and heroic at Gallipoli. For the twenty five days that Simpson served in Gallipoli people saw a selfless heroism, a sense of self-sacrifice arising from great courage in adversity.

Simpson was a hero, not so much for who he was and what he did, but for what he symbolized. What Simpson did was not particularly significant in the greater course of the war, but his larrikinism and selflessness captured the imagination of people crying out for hope in a war-torn world. He was not remembered so much for who he was but what his bravery, courage and self-sacrifice embodied.

This same sense of 'hero' is evident in the course of our nation's history. Our nation and our heritage have been built on characters like John Simpson – people who have, through their own unique characters, captured the imagination of the people. Characters who have: contributed to the wealth of our national heritage; shown their larrikin spirit; displayed a rebellion against authority and the system, to give to society their unique and individual gifts. Our national identity is based on a sense of mateship and equality and embedded in a rebellion against authority – 'We value excellence as well as fairness, independence as dearly as mateship' (Draft Constitution Preamble, John Howard Prime Minister of Australia 1999). Characters like Ned Kelly, John Flynn, Helen Caldicott, and Fred Hollows have all shown the qualities of heroism recognised in John Simpson in 1915.

Ned Kelly, the famous son of Glenrowan, won the hearts of the common people of his time and more than a century on, like Simpson, has become a hero of the nation. The young Kelly, defying authority and robbing the rich, fitted the popular image of the bold bushranger and found empathy with the people. His stand at Glenrowan brought him a nation's admiration. He was seen as a victim of a vicious system, a young man hounded into crime. He was fiercely loyal to his family and friends and his death by hanging, fell little short of martyrdom. He became a symbol of national pride and prior to his execution



a massive movement was launched to save his life. 'Huge public meetings and torch-lit marches were held, petitions were signed and a deputation to the governor was made' (ABC 2004). He became an Australian legend and his name gained immortality as a national hero who was the embodiment of the Australian spirit.

The Reverend John Flynn was a character of the outback whose determination and love for the people of the isolated west made him a hero of the nation. 'Dressed in a suit, driving an old ute and puffing on his pipe' (ABC, 2004), Flynn, like Simpson, was an unlikely hero: a dreamer and a visionary. He was a character who captured the imagination of the nation, whose fierce loyalty to the bush and its people, enhanced the quality of life in distant communities by reducing isolation and loneliness. Faced with set backs and considerable opposition, 'the kind and humble minister of the church forged on to bring the pedal radio and morse code to isolated communities' (ABC, 2004) and gave Outback Australia the solution to its communication problems. His sense of Simpson's selflessness, determination and drive gained him respect and the tag of hero of a nation.

Dr Helen Caldicott is another Australian hero whose biography would suggest otherwise. She was a loner, persistent and passionate, who identified with the 'Robin Hood' ideal of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. She was 'empowered by Germaine Greer's rebellious ideology of not being what society expects and not doing what people tell you to do' (ABC, 2004). She became angry and used her energy to lead a massive anti-nuclear awareness campaign which drove a world wide movement to change the world. This humble spirited woman of integrity is, in the eyes of a nation, a peacemaker, humanitarian and national hero.

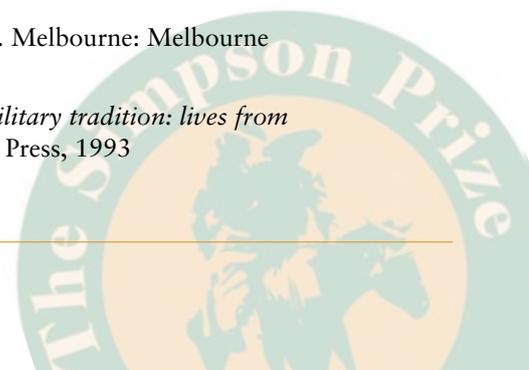
Fred Hollows was a strong believer in equality. He became known as the 'wild colonial boy' (ABC 2004) of Australian surgery. He had a deep love of the bush and a wild temper but his larrikin character inspired others to help the outspoken hero to achieve his dream. 'Fred was a passionate man, gruff and impatient when things or people got in the way of his dreams' (ABC 2004). He made enemies because of his disregard of due process and authority, but Fred became a national hero because his cause and his character captured the imagination of the people. He showed great courage in working towards his vision and his determination did not waver in the face of adversity.

There are many other Australians who demonstrate the characteristics of a hero, characteristics seen in Simpson in 1915. These people are ordinary people, people with a passion, who set out to do a job, people who show persistence and tenacity, people driven by a sense of equality, people who believe in humanity, people with a sense of national pride, people who live next door and work in our communities. These people embody the same spirit that has been recognised in our national heroes – a spirit of self sacrifice, of courage, of character and of witty larrikinism.



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