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

by Monte Sheppard, Cranbrook School

John Simpson Kirkpatrick is mistakenly regarded as one of Australia's greatest war heroes. His statue stands at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra and his image adorns the 100 dollar note. Few veterans are rewarded with such eternal flames. This esteemed position is due more to a fledging nation's need for war heroes and a love to conjure heroes than any extraordinary valor on Simpson's part. Simpson was surely a brave man who risked his own life to assist others and in this respect he paid the ultimate price, although, a great many Australian soldiers have done no less. What distinguished Simpson ultimately was that his story was so colourful as to be ripe for the making of a myth.

Princeton University describes a hero as a man distinguished by exceptional courage and strength¹. In these terms Simpson was undoubtedly a hero. He worked for almost a month amid dangerous shrapnel and rifle-fire, rescuing many soldiers with a donkey he had stumbled upon after landing at Gallipoli.

Simpson's glorification however overstates the extent of his bravery relative to other Anzacs. Simpson's ingenuity and selflessness are qualities that have been displayed to the same or greater extent by a great many Australians in war. At Lone Pine and on the Western Front there were the men who went over the top to an almost certain death. In Kokoda there were the men who fought in the harsh jungle conditions and those who fought in the battle of Long Tan in Vietnam against impossible odds. These are just a few examples among many. Journalist and historian Les Carlyon said, 'He was remembered, and some perhaps more worthy, were forgotten'². Simpson risked his life so others may live, he showed courage and bravery, although in terms of war there is nothing exceptional about this.

What makes Simpson unique is that his is a colourful and quirky story. Its appeal is strengthened by the fact that it combines three traits Australians see as central to their character; ingenuity, disregard for authority and helping mates in need. Central to the Simpson myth is the understanding that he unofficially split from his unit upon landing at Gallipoli that by using a donkey he found a more efficient way of transporting wounded diggers than the standard, a stretcher. These themes appeal directly to the Australian nature,



much more so than a man who followed orders and went over the top with standard-issue equipment to a certain death. As Les Carlyon notes, 'He was Christ-like, a one-man epic with a donkey. In one sense, his appeal was like that of Gordon of Khartoum; in another, it played to the way Australians like to see themselves'.³

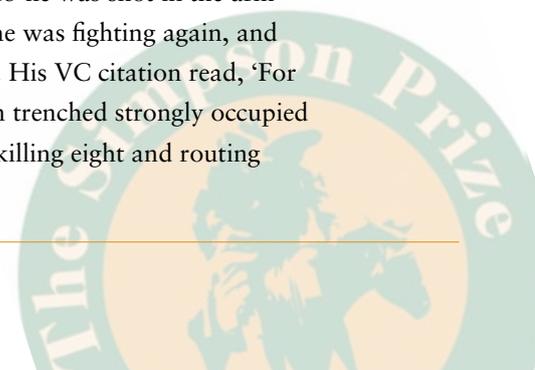
As Simpson's peculiar acts of bravery occurred over a four week period, there was plenty of opportunity for fellow soldiers to recognise what he was doing, and naturally word filtered back to Australia. About a month after his death the first accounts of Simpson appeared in the Australian press. Undoubtedly its peculiarities would have appealed to the Australian public. By 1916 with the publication of E.C Buley's, *Glorious Deeds of Australasian's in the Great War* the legend had achieved popularity. It is noticeable that at this point the story is embellished and begins to take on mythical qualities. Among his claims, Buley accounts for Simpson saving over 300 men over four weeks. This makes the story all the more appealing, but in the four weeks Simpson was alive, it would have been a physical impossibility given the time the journey took to rescue each man.⁴

After the war, Australia's official war historian C.E.W. Bean published the history of the war, *The Story of Anzac*, in which the Simpson story is given 300 words. Bean is more reserved than Buley in his account of Simpson's actions, but nonetheless gives the story the authenticity that saw it pass into history texts and folklore.

However, the heroic qualities Simpson displayed have been demonstrated by a vast number of Australian servicemen and women since World War One. Since 1915 Australian forces have fought in major conflicts, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Iraq and Afghanistan engagements as well as many peace keeping missions. That they have always shown great courage and determination is an important part of Australia's national character.

Ninety-six Australians have been awarded the Victoria Cross for their gallantry. Typical of the courage of these men is Bruce Steel Kingsbury, a soldier fighting in Kokoda in 1942. As the Japanese had broken through his battalion's right flank, Kingsbury charged forward with a Bren gun firing with a complete disregard for his safety. He proceeded to recover much lost ground and saved the battalion headquarters. He was subsequently killed after inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. 'His coolness, determination and devotion to duty in the face of great odds were an inspiration to his comrades',⁵ read the citation, and for his deeds he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Captain Alfred Shout was the most highly decorated Australian of the Gallipoli campaign. He organised a bayonet charge against the Turks despite intense machine gun fire. During this charge, Shout individually carried more than a dozen men out of the firing line and for this he was awarded the Military Cross. On the 11th May 1915 he was shot in the arm and had to stay aboard a hospital ship. Just fifteen days later he was fighting again, and this time it was at Lone Pine where he won the Victoria Cross. His VC citation read, 'For most conspicuous bravery at Lone Pine... Shout charged down trenced strongly occupied by the enemy and personally threw four bombs among them, killing eight and routing



the remainder. In the afternoon of the same day, from the position gained in the morning, he captured a further length of trench under similar conditions...'⁶

Better known is Sir Charles Kingsford Smith. When serving in France he destroyed four enemy planes. He was later shot in the foot in flight, which resulted in amputation of several toes and being awarded the Military Cross. His military career ended as result of this. Like Simpson he too became revered after death, and his deeds did not constitute the levels of glorification he was shown; Sydney's main airport named after him and his image on the 20 dollar bill. Like Simpson, it was not for his wartime gallantry that he is regarded as a legend, but this time for his achievements in aviation, that made him all the more appealing than Shout and Kingsbury.

As has been shown, Australian servicemen and women have distinguished themselves in many theatres of war since 1915. Their deeds have helped to forge our notion of who we are. The story of John Simpson Kirkpatrick contributes significantly to this.

There should be no doubt that Simpson is a war hero as he gave his life to save others. Although, the extent of recognition he gained as a war hero, ultimately overstates his heroism relative to other servicemen and women. That Simpson is better known as a war hero than Shout, Kingsbury and Kingsford Smith, whose courage far exceeded his, is indicative of this.

Endnotes

- 1 <<http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=hero>>
- 2 Carlyon, Les, *Gallipoli*, 'Heroes and Myths' chapter, p. 268
- 3 Carlyon, Les, *Gallipoli*, 'Heroes and Myths' chapter, p. 268
- 4 Wilson, Graham, *The Donkey Vote. A VC for Simpson – The Case Against, Sabretache: The Journal and Proceedings of the Military Historical Society of Australia*, vol. 47, no. 4, December 2006, pp. 25–37
- 5 VC citation appeared in the *London Gazette* on 9 February 1943
- 6 VC citation appeared in the *London Gazette* on 15 October 1915

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