

SIMPSON OF GALLIPOLI in Illawarra 1910

As time marches on the Anzac legend continues to grow, and as the recent ceremonies in Australia and overseas proved, interest in the story of that bloody campaign is high.

Whilst Illawarra had its own share of Gallipoli veterans, perhaps the single most famous of all Anzac soldiers - and also one with an Illawarra connection - was John Simpson Kirkpatrick (1892-1915), also known as 'the Good Samaritan of Gallipoli'.

Simpson, with the assistance of a donkey, rescued many a wounded soldier from the valleys and ridges at Anzac Cove during the first three weeks of the Allied campaign there in April-May 1915. He courageously evacuated the soldiers from the frontline, and with the aid of his famous donkey brought many wounded Anzacs from danger to the nearest medic or field hospital.

Simpson was a stretcher-bearer in 'C' Section of the 3rd Field Ambulance. Upon the morning of 25 April 1915 he was part of that initial landing at Anzac Cove, and was confronted with the steep terrain and stubborn resistance. As casualties quickly grew he adopted a stray donkey and used it to assist in the transport of wounded soldiers from the battlefield to safety, and also in the supply of food and water to those at the front. Simpson had always had a way with animals, and by some miraculous talent was able to calm this animal amidst the noise and turmoil of battle.

After three weeks of courageous endeavour, working alone and saving hundreds of wounded soldiers, on the morning of 19 May 1915 he was shot through the heart by Turkish machine-gun bullet and killed. Simpson was buried that evening at Hell Spit, and lamented by all those on the peninsula aware of the heroism of 'the man with the donkey'.

An account of Simpson's exploits at Gallipoli may be found in the Reverend Sir Irving Benson's *The Man with the Donkey - John Simpson Kirkpatrick, the Good Samaritan of Gallipoli* (London, 1965).

Benson's book reveals that Simpson was born on 6 July 1892 at 10 South Eldon Street, South Shields, on the east coast of England. His was of Scottish stock and from his published letters and other reminiscences we learn he was something of a 'character', had a strong sense of responsibility, and a sincere love for his mother, continually sending her money whilst he travelled the world.

Sections of his 1909-14 letters - now held by the Australian War Memorial - are reproduced in Benson's book, though they have been edited and somewhat sanitised, and do not fully reveal Simpson the man. According to a recent article by Peter Cochrane ('Simpson Uncensored', *Good Weekend*, 21 April 1990), the letters reveal Simpson as a 'radical Labor man, reflecting on his attitude to the "old country" and on his working life in the new, displaying 'his wilful temperament and his apparently short fuse'.

Unfortunately the published extracts are also sparse in their descriptions of Illawarra, where he lived for 6 months during 1910, and visited briefly during 1912-13.

Simpson's early years were difficult. His father, a ship's captain, was incapacitated in 1904 and his son was forced to go to work as a dairy hand to help support the family.

Just two days after his father's funeral Simpson joined the merchant navy and sailed from England aboard the SS Heighington on 19 October 1909, and at the age of 17. After briefly returning home for Christmas that year, he again sailed aboard the SS Yedda on 12 February 1910, this time for Australia. Little was he to know that Christmas 1909 would be the last time he saw his beloved mother and sister Anne.

On 13 May 1910 Simpson left the Yedda at Newcastle, New South Wales, and spent the following two months travelling through part of Queensland and New South Wales, 'humping his bluey', before heading south towards Illawarra at the end of July. One of his letters, dated 31 July 1910, describes his arrival at Coledale from Sydney:

. . . Well I got a couple of quid off the chief and ten bob off the second so I made off for the mines at once so by the time I paid my train fare down to Coledale and brought some working clothes I have not much left I am sending you a post office order for a quid I have got to start at Coledale pit on Monday night and I will have to work 3 weeks before I get pay so it will be three weeks before I can send you any money. Now Mother when you answer this letter address it to me C/O Post Office Coledale, New South Wales because it is only a little township and there is no postman.

From late July to mid December 1910 Simpson was resident in Illawarra, at work in the local coal mines. According to information gleaned from the letters and postcards, he spent about a month at Coledale before moving to Corrimal mid August. On 29 September he wrote another letter to his mother:

. . . Now Mother I suppose you have got that first letter which I sent from Corrimal and I sent you a quid in it and I am sending you a quid in this one as well I only sent you 15 bob last pay as I had only a bad pay last pay . . .

In a letter dated Corrimal, 27 November 1910, he writes to his sister Anne:

. . . Now Anne I have not much time to say as it is three oclock and I have to get changed to go to the pit I go in at five and I have a long walk up the mountain.

Early in December he moved from Corrimal to Mount Kembla, telling his mother in a letter dated 16 January 1911

. . . I left Corrimal about a week after I wrote you that letter with the Xmas cards in it I went from Corrimal to a place called Mt. Kembla but I only stopped there a week for it was right up on top of the mountain and it was a very quiet place so I left and worked my passage to Fremantle in Western Australia.

By this time he was second steward aboard the SS Kooringa, a cargo ship which serviced the Australian coast. Whilst serving on the Kooringa, Simpson visited Port Kembla a number of times, writing letters from that port in 1911 and 1913.

The Kooringa regularly sailed between Port Kembla and Fremantle, visiting other ports such as Melbourne, Sydney and Newcastle.

Simpson stayed with the Kooringa until about May 1913, afterwards spending a couple of months ashore at Melbourne resting and recuperated from almost 4 years at sea. By December he was working on the SS Tarcoola out of Adelaide, and joined the SS Yankalilla around February of 1914. During this period he variously worked in the messroom and as a stoker.

Sometime during July 1914 the Tankalilla left Newcastle for Fremantle, where Simpson enlisted on 25 August. After a couple of months training with the 3rd. Field Ambulance at Blackboy Camp, his convoy left Australia during October and arrived in Egypt mid December. After a further three months training, Simpson and his comrades headed off the the Dardanelles, landing at dawn on 25 April 1915 - the rest is history.

His courage upon the battlefields of Gallipoli during those 3 short weeks made him an instant legend among his fellow Anzacs, and later all Australians came to honour his bravery.

Michael Organ