

Testament of Courage

SIMPSON

Simpson and His Donkey have been the subject of articles over the years since the first story of their gallant exploits came out of Gallipoli. The articles have usually been of a controversial nature.

In this short account by Mr. C. Francis, you will read contradictory reports on Pte. Simpson and his donkeys which are contained in officially recorded statements.

None of these things matter now. This article, reprinted from "Reveille", the voice of the R.S.L., is purely a testament to the man's supreme courage.

Private John Simpson is an almost legendary figure in the history of Australia at War. He was a man who, by his selfless devotion to duty and deep compassion for the wounded, in the brief time allowed to him, set a standard of unostentatious bravery and self-sacrifice that has captured the imagination of all who have read of his deeds.

Born John Simpson Kirkpatrick (he chose to enlist under the name of John Simpson) in County Durham, England, on 6th July, 1892, he enlisted at Blackboy Hill Camp, Western Australia, on 25th August, 1914, in the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance.

Of stocky build, the possessor of a carefree and cheerful nature, his qualities were kindness and courage. Passionately fond of animals—every dog was his friend in camp—he even managed to take a young possum with him on the trip to Egypt. It seemed quite right that he would later seek the assistance of an animal in his work of saving life.

Simpson was the second man ashore from his boat at the landing at Gallipoli. The first and third men of "C" Bearer Section were killed. Because of the heavy casualties suffered by the section on that first day and the loss of equipment, it has been suggested that this is the reason Simpson got the idea of commandeering a small donkey to assist him on his errands of mercy.

Various reasons have been given to explain the presence of these animals at Anzac Cove—the carrying of water, the testing of water (it is a well-known fact that donkeys will not drink impure or poisoned water) and even the highly-coloured explanation that a number of them were to be turned loose with lighted faggots on their backs and lanterns round their necks to frighten the superstitious Turks in the darkness. The most likely version is that put forward by members of the 16th Battalion Machine Gun Section, in that two donkeys were purchased by the battalion at Lemnos for the purpose of carrying

gear and ammunition. One of them, it is said, was recognised as being the donkey commandeered by Simpson.

WHICH NAME?

Again there is some confusion about the name of the donkey used by Simpson. "Murphy", "Duffy", and "Abdul" are three of the names by which the animal was known. It has been said that he operated with two donkeys. Simpson himself was known by various nicknames, one of which was "Murphy"—this, no doubt, arising from an incorrect assessment of his accent. There are conflicting reports on the manner of his death and widely varied are the numbers mentioned of wounded men he brought to the safety of the dressing station on the beach. None of these conflicting reports, however, alter the fact that he was a supremely brave man motivated by no other desire than to help his comrades when they were so desperately in need of help. The terrible conditions of those early days were such that, at a later date, blurred reports must inevitably have resulted. The main aspect, on which all are agreed, is that during the short period of his service on Gallipoli, Simpson behaved with almost superhuman bravery, carried a great many of his wounded comrades to safety and earned the admiration of all who saw him at work.

The shortages of bearers and equipment after that first day were so great that Simpson (Kirkpatrick), acquiring his small donkey, assumed a free hand and ran his own casualty-clearing service from Shrapnel Gully (later renamed Monash Valley) to the beach ambulance stations. For 25 days—he was killed on 19th May—he worked untiringly in his dedicated role, completely oblivious of the heavy machine-gun fire, bursting shrapnel and deadly sniping down the Valley administering to his comrades. He would give the slightly wounded man first aid, loosen the equipment of a dying man and for the leg wounds and those who had enough strength and presence of mind to hang on he would carry on his donkey.