**Taken for a ride?**

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Anzac legend John Simpson Kirkpatrick and his donkey as depicted in the painting by Horace Moore-Jones.

**A federal government inquiry has found that the legendary heroism of Simpson and his donkey is more myth than reality. Mark Baker reports.**

He is the soldier who was the embodiment of all we admire in the Anzac legend: tough, stoic, fearless and selfless. His life exemplified the finest qualities of mateship and heroism. His death enshrined all that was noble in the lost cause that claimed him.

His deeds have inspired, and been celebrated by, generations of young Australians. His image has graced banknotes, coins and postage stamps. His story has been told and retold in books, movies and plays. He has been deified in paintings and sculptures.

John Simpson Kirkpatrick was a knockabout 22-year-old Englishman who enlisted in the First AIF under his middle name to hide the fact that he was a deserter from the merchant navy.

He landed at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915 as a stretcher-bearer with the 3rd Field Ambulance. Just 24 days later he was dead, shot through the heart as he carried a wounded soldier on the back of a donkey he had found wandering at Anzac Cove the day after the landings.

Simpson and his donkey have become the most famous figures of the Gallipoli campaign, in which more than 8000 Australians were killed. Their story has been an integral element of the process by which a crushing military defeat has been transformed in the national consciousness into a foundation stone of identity.

So what are we to do when, after a century of veneration, the legend of Simpson and his donkey is officially punctured and new evidence emerges that the story is largely a myth inflated and exaggerated by the sloppy work of journalists, amateur historians and jingoistic politicians.

A year-long inquiry by a government tribunal last week flatly rejected the long-running populist campaign to have Simpson awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross - the highest award for gallantry in the Commonwealth. But, more significantly, the tribunal found that Simpson's deeds were no more exceptional than those of hundreds of other stretcher bearers working at Gallipoli at the time. The inquiry's report said there were many accounts describing Simpson's conduct. ''The tribunal was, however, unable to find any witness accounts of a specific act of valour … which could single out Simpson's bravery from other stretcher-bearers in the Field Ambulance.''

In the process of what has been the most forensic review of Simpson's war service, the tribunal heard startling evidence that much of the legend of the man with the donkey has been built on false or faulty evidence, richly embellished over the years as history has been turned into hagiography.

In a 60-page private submission, Graham Wilson, an official in the awards branch of the Defence Department who has written extensively about Simpson over many years, says: ''Just about every word that has ever been written or spoken about Simpson, apart from the bare facts of his civilian life and his basic military service, is a lie.''

Wilson demolishes the assertion - so often repeated that it has become widely accepted fact - that Simpson had ''saved the lives'' of at least 300 Diggers. He says it was physically impossible for Simpson to have assisted more than half that number of wounded in the few weeks before his death, and that military records and witness accounts indicate he only helped lightly wounded men whose lives were not in danger.

Wilson also debunks the persistent claim that Simpson repeatedly dashed into no man's land while under Turkish fire to rescue wounded soldiers. He says there is no archival evidence that Simpson or any other stretcher bearers ventured into no man's land to rescue the wounded in the first weeks after the Gallipoli landings as no soldiers were stranded at that time.

But in the biggest challenge to the Simpson legend, Wilson confirms that some witness accounts that have been repeatedly cited as evidence of Simpson's exceptional bravery are fraudulent.

In 1965, Sir Irving Benson published The Man with the Donkey, one of the most popular accounts of the Simpson legend. It appeared on the 50th anniversary of Gallipoli, when the federal government presented every veteran of the campaign with a handsome medallion and lapel badge featuring Simpson and his donkey.

The book includes the astonishing story of Able Seaman William ''Billy'' Lowes of the Royal Naval Division who was badly wounded in the thigh on the night of May 2, 1915 and evacuated, semi-conscious, by a man with a donkey he recognised as Jack Kirkpatrick - a childhood pal from South Shields in northern England.

Benson said Lowes had told him the story - the only direct testimony that Simpson rescued men with life-threatening injuries - during a research trip to England. Lowes had written to Simpson's mother during the war giving the same account.

But, according to Wilson, the service record of TZ/64 Able Seaman W.Lowes of the Royal Naval Division shows that while he served at Gallipoli, he was never wounded. ''Billy Lowes was never wounded and therefore could never have ridden on Simpson's donkey … When Lowes wrote to Simpson's grieving mother and told her about his encounter with her son Jack, his supposed boyhood friend, he lied,'' Wilson says.

Benson's papers also include a letter signed ''No 239 Pte W.R'' from the 3rd Field Ambulance who describes witnessing Simpson's courageous help to the wounded and says: ''Many times we told him to be careful at that certain part of Shrapnel Gully but he was too brave to take any notice.''

Wilson points out that the official service record of 239 Private William Robertson of the 3rd Field Ambulance shows he did not land at Gallipoli until July 22, 1915 - more than two months after Simpson's death.

Another of Benson's sources - and a source cited by subsequent amateur historians - is the so-called ''Gallipoli original'' F.W.Dyke who described a charming incident in which Simpson asked a chaplain to move along the beach while he dealt with his obstinate donkey. Dyke quoted Simpson saying: ''I'll have to speak to him in Hindustani, and Padre, I wouldn't like you to think I was swearing at him.''

As Wilson confirms, only one F.W.Dyke enlisted in the First AIF - 4181 Private Frederick William Dyke of the 9th Battalion. But Dyke did not enlist until August 16, 1915 - three months after Simpson's death - and never served at Gallipoli.

Says Wilson: ''I am not for a moment suggesting that Simpson was any less brave than his fellow stretcher bearers, far from it. What I am saying here, however, is that there is not a single shred of proof anywhere that Simpson was even a scrap braver than his fellow stretcher bearers.''

Historian and journalist Les Carlyon agrees, in somewhat gentler terms, in his submission to the inquiry: ''The myths are stronger, and more numerous, than the facts. Simpson became the legendary figure of Gallipoli, not on the peninsula itself, but in Australian and British newspapers months after his death. He was beatified, then canonised.''

Carlyon says a number of stretcher bearers worked the same route as Simpson, along Shrapnel Gully and into Monash Valley, and did ''much the same work'' as the man with the donkey.

He says Simpson was not particularly well known beyond the area where he worked and few diaries and letters in the Australian War Memorial research centre mention him.

''Simpson, in death, acquired a fame he never had in life. His was an affecting story and the public warmed to it. Simpson became a folk hero and this is never going to change and that is perhaps no bad thing.''

So how did the commendable, if unexceptional, deeds of an ordinary stretcher bearer who conscripted a donkey as his mate become the ultimate exemplar of Australian heroism at Gallipoli?

It started with Australian war correspondent Charles Bean who, in one of his first dispatches from Anzac Cove, sent a gushing account of Simpson and his donkey that described emotions and motives Bean can only have guessed at - a degree of poetic licence that was surprisingly uncharacteristic of his later work as the official war historian.

A few weeks after Simpson's death, Bean wrote: ''You cannot hurry a donkey very much, however close the shells may burst, and he absolutely came to disregard bullets and shrapnel. The man with the donkey became fatalistic - if they were going to hit him, they would whatever his precautions.

''For nearly four weeks he came up and down that valley - through the hottest shrapnel, through the aimed bullets of the snipers and unnamed bullets which came over the ridges. When the shells were so hot that many others thought it wiser to duck for cover as they passed, the man with the donkey calmly went his way as if nothing more serious than a summer shower were happening.''

Many other accounts soon appeared in newspapers around Australia. E.C.Buley's Glorious Deeds of the Australasians in the Great War - which included a breathless account of Simpson's heroism - was adopted as a school text in Victoria in 1916. It was Buley who had first described Simpson repeatedly making ''a lightning dash'' into no man's land to rescue wounded men whom he would carry out on his back, a claim based on anonymous sources.

Yet, as Graham Wilson points out, Buley was a ''scurrilous gutter press journalist'' who had been jailed for theft and fraud in Melbourne before emigrating to England in 1900. And before writing Glorious Deeds, he had penned a propagandist pot-boiler entitled The Real Kaiser - ''replete with images of raped Belgian nuns and French and Belgian babies being tossed on the points of Prussian bayonets''.

The repetition and embellishment of such accounts turned them to gospel truth for later generations of Australians, with the few bold enough to question or challenge the detail risking accusations of heresy. As the legend has grown, so has the clamour to right the presumed injustice that Simpson's gallantry was never rewarded with a Victoria Cross.

That campaign - backed by a clutch of vocal MPs from both sides of politics - was instrumental in Simpson being one of 13 servicemen from the First and Second World Wars and Vietnam whose cases for the award of a retrospective VC were considered by the Defence Honours and Awards Appeals Tribunal.

But the tribunal found there was no such injustice in the case of Simpson who, on May 14, 1915 - five days before his death - was one of eight members of the 3rd Field Ambulance commended for their work by the officer in charge of medical services at Gallipoli, Colonel Neville Howse, VC.

All of them, including Simpson, were subsequently Mentioned in Dispatches, an award entitling them to wear an oak leaf emblem on their service medals.

The tribunal also curtly rejected long-running arguments that Simpson had been denied a VC due to procedural errors or administrative stonewalling. ''On both process and merits, Simpson's case was properly considered at the time. The process and procedures were … appropriate and fair. Private Simpson was appropriately honoured with an MID. A merits review was unable to sustain an alternative outcome.''

After a century of overwrought adulation, it is perhaps time to do justice to the memory of ''Jack'' Kirkpatrick by setting the record straight on the facts of his service and sacrifice.

He was a brave and tenacious soldier who gave his life doing his duty and supporting his mates - like thousands of others whose deeds were never acknowledged and are now long forgotten.

**Mark Baker is editor-at-large*.***