Legends, Facts and History:  
the Legend of the ANZACs

By Jarrah Day

Word Count: 2416
The facts surrounding the soldiers of the Great War have always intrigued me, but it was their legends that have changed me. Uncovering my relatives’ stories has been fascinating, terrifying, touching and saddening. I learnt about the Unknown Soldier.

‘He is all of them, and he is one of us.’
The smell of bread, baking, wafted through the house as cockatoos screeched and magpies warbled while they splashed around in the birdbaths hanging on the veranda. The child I once was, sat on the warm wooden floor, the sun heating my toes, entranced as my grandmother, Margaret, recalled stories of the Great War that she had heard from her parents.

“One day, when Blue Crase was riding with Spencer, all the soldiers had been given a tot of rum to drink because they were to go into a special battle. Blue knew that Spencer did not drink alcohol so he asked if he could have his rum. Blue put it safe in the pocket of his big coat over the front of his saddle and off they went. They had a very steep hill to negotiate and when they were safely there, Blue reached for the rum and to his shock, he found it had dropped out of the pocket and was lost. He certainly could not go back to find it.”

In those early years of my life, a yearning for knowledge arose within me. I wondered what had really happened during the Great War; how did it change the lives of those who lived through it. I also wondered who these people were, who had given up everything for a war on the other side of the world. The facts surrounding these people intrigued me, but it was their legends that have changed me. Of the many people who I heard stories about, there is one that I feel especially close to, someone who had such a profound impact on my great-grandfather, Hugh Spencer Kentish, that his name and legacy has continued down through Spencer’s descendents for nearly one hundred years. His name was Reginald Stow Kentish. This essay is in part his story, and in part my story. It is one story out of thousands of Australian soldiers’ stories, one story out of millions of stories across the globe.

For thousands of years, legends have connected generations by enabling people to learn from the experiences of those long passed away. Legends are a unique style of story, communicated often through oral storytelling. While this allows a very close relationship between the tale and those who hear it, it also allows parts of the story to drift, and to become exaggerated. Legends are a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences, and a reaffirmation of commonly held values. The game ‘silent whispers’, in which a group of children pass a message around a circle via whispers in each other’s ears, is a simple childhood game which clearly demonstrates how oral stories are easily modified, and can even change meaning altogether. While this oral tradition can distort the facts, it also creates a magical element within the story, encapsulating a tiny part of each child’s personality within and an emphasis on the sections that they want to remember. In doing

---

1 Email from Margaret Day OAM 15th August 2010 subject Really True Stories
2 The Rig-Veda is thought to have been written before 1000 B.C. over 3000 years ago. T. Oberlies (1998). Die Religion des Rigveda: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien. Wien p. 155.
3 "Legend, typically, is a short (mono-) episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified [sic] historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode" T. Tangherlini (1990) "It Happened Not Too Far from Here...": A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization Western Folklore, Vol. 49, No. 4., p. 85.
4 Ibid
so, through time there is an emphasis created on the elements of personal interest to each of the subsequent storytellers. This subtle distortion of the truth and facts is also relevant to written legends. Every age and place has its own legends, and one that is dear to Australians and New Zealanders is the ANZAC Legend.

At the Entombment of the Unknown Soldier, the Australian Prime Minister of the time, Paul Keating, said that the ANZAC legend ‘is a legend not of sweeping military victories so much as triumphs against the odds, of courage and ingenuity in adversity. It is a legend of free and independent spirits whose discipline derived less from military formalities and customs than from the bonds of mateship and the demands of necessity.’\(^6\) This is a legend that was vital in shaping the identity of Australia. It contains not only facts, but also the personal tales and memories of those who fought in the Great War. Every year thousands of Australians travel to our nation’s capital, Canberra, and rise before dawn to commemorate ANZAC Day. In 2013, approximately 35,000 people attended the ANZAC Day ceremony in Canberra, the highest number ever recorded.\(^7\) More significantly, many Australians now travel to the numerous Australian War Memorial sites across Europe in a pilgrimage of their lost relatives and remembrance of the events of war. This is especially evident at Gallipoli where there are so many visitors that a ballot is required to regulate attendance at ANZAC day commemorations. Like many others, I undertook this journey from Australian war memorials to various sites across Europe.

**November 2012, Canberra, Australian War Memorial**

146. I was counting the panels off; a shadow shrouded the cloisters, its darkness cast by a warm sun that streamed across the courtyard, where the internal flame flickered to its reflection in the pool. 147. The panels gave off a cold metallic gleam, contrasting with the faded poppies laid by thousands of people. 148. My hand raised and brushed against the cool dark metal, as I pushed bright redness between the cold metallic panels and amongst the faded red poppies. Kentish. R. S. Who was this man, who meant so much to my family? 2189. Private. 48th Battalion. Australian Army.\(^8\) To mean so much, he could not have been just these simple facts. What is his story? What is his legend?

Nearly a year later as I gazed out across a sea of identical white gravestones,\(^9\) I reflected upon these thoughts. The Commonwealth war graves are renowned for their uniformity, and I could see why. Different graves were distinguishable by their inscriptions but their grave stones were identical, regardless of their rank, age, race, or creed. Prior to

\(^6\) Remembrance Day Speech which outlined some of the key qualities of the ANZAC soldiers, delivered by the Prime Minister, The Hon. P. J. Keating MP, at the funeral service of the Unknown Australian Soldier, 11th November 1993.


\(^9\) Appendix 1 contains a photo at Tyne Cot Cemetery, Belgium of view I witnessed.
the Great War, Imperial forces had never suffered casualties severe enough to warrant a unified approach to the layout of cemeteries. Recognising that it would be undesirable to have controversy due to differences in opinions over such matters, the Imperial War Graves Commission appointed Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Fredrick Kenyon to advise on the layout and nature of cemeteries and memorials. He was of the opinion that all should be honoured equally in death.\(^\text{10}\) The rows of stones that make up the Commonwealth war cemeteries clearly show his vision, and the emotion that their stature emits is overwhelming. Seeing these stones, I thought of what I had known about Stow while placing a poppy beside his name on the wall of honour at the Australian War Memorial. At the time, his personality and his interests were unknown to me, his letters unread; his legend was no greater than that of any soldier buried in this cemetery. The facts associated with him told no more of his story than the many blank slates that faced me. The truth of his story was deeper than mere facts. The truth of all their stories was deeper than mere facts.

Many of the facts of war are shocking, and what was experienced was often so disturbing that misconceptions may even be preferable to the full truth. Details are sometimes lost throughout the ANZAC legend, but at times, the lacking of these details enhances the legend. The absence of certain details grew out of a need to protect both those at home and at war from their losses, their sorrow, and the horror at what they had witnessed and what they had done. Based purely on verifiable facts, John Simpson Kirkpatrick and his donkey are far from an ideal hero for the ANZAC legend, however, his part in the ANZAC legend grew to have an impact far greater than that of his deeds during the Great War. Born in England in 1892, he was the son of Robert Kirkpatrick and Sarah Simpson.\(^\text{11}\) At the age of 17, he joined the merchant navy, before deserting in May 1910 in New South Wales.\(^\text{12}\) He spent several years working in Australia, before joining the Australian Imperial force under the name of John Simpson on the 25th of August 1914. He, like many others, believed that they would travel directly to England, and he planned to desert once he arrived there.\(^\text{13}\) Unfortunately, for him, before they reached England the troops were diverted to Gallipoli. Landing at Gallipoli on the 25th of April 1915, he started using donkeys to transport conscious men with leg wounds.\(^\text{14}\) There are many accounts that claim to have involved Simpson and his donkey, but most are impossible to verify. However, these records usually refer to Simpson as a man who worked tirelessly and bravely. Amongst the


few indisputable records, there is a record from the 3rd Field Ambulance Diary on the 1st of May 1915 which says:

No 202 Pte Simpson has shown initiation [sic] in using a donkey from the 26th to carry slightly wounded cases and has kept up his work from early morning till night every day since.\footnote{15}

Sadly, just under a month after arriving on Gallipoli, machine gun bullets killed Simpson on the 19th of May 1915.\footnote{16} Although rather than halting his fame, if anything his death propelled his fame further allowing his story to become legendary.\footnote{17,18} Literature published at the time, such as The Glorious deeds of Australasians in the Great War and various newspaper articles further pushed the story of Simpson and his donkey until it almost became mythical.\footnote{19,20} The accounts of his deeds were amplified, supposably every soldier in the area knew him by name, and he rescued in excess of three hundred men, a feat that would be physically impossible during the short time that he was at Gallipoli. While many of these facts cannot be true, his story served a far greater purpose than simply relating the truth of what had actually happened. For the Australians at home it became a legend and story to take pride in, and for the soldiers still fighting, it provided motivation, strength, courage, and footsteps in which they could aim to follow. Simpson’s story represented fearlessness and selflessness, and came to represent all the heroic selfless deeds performed by ANZAC soldiers during the Great War. The legend he became part of helped the Australian people to deal with their losses, grief, and their sorrow and helped the soldiers to continue to fight against the odds.

We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven and sleepless. Even when we’re back a bit we can’t sleep for our own guns. I have one puttee, a dead man’s helmet, another dead man’s gas protector, a dead man’s bayonet. My tunic is rotten with other men’s blood and partly splattered with a dead man’s brains. It is horrible, but why should you people at home not know?\footnote{21}

\footnote{15} The record for May 1\textsuperscript{st} is found on the last page of the April record.  
\footnote{16} Australia’s favourite hero | Simpson and his donkey. ANZAC. http://www.anzacs.net/Simpson.htm [accessed 7\textsuperscript{th} August 2013].
\footnote{18} E. Buley (1916). GLORIOUS DEEDS OF AUSTRALASIANS in the Great War. 5\textsuperscript{th} ed. London: Andrew Melrose, LTD. p. 318. http://ia601600.us.archive.org/12/items/gloriousdeedsofa00bule/gloriousdeedsofa00bule.pdf [accessed 26\textsuperscript{th} July 2013].
\footnote{19} ibid
Over 45,000 Australians died during the Great War, a terrible loss that was sorely felt by all Australians. Accounts of many of these peoples’ deaths were sent home to their mournful families. A surprising majority of these letters suggested that the soldier killed had died cleanly or instantly from a clean head shot or similar. Letters describing the true horror were very rare. The suggested ratio of people who died instantaneously to those that suffered is implausible, but this softening of the truth may have served a very important purpose. The mates and soldiers who wrote those letters probably could not bear to relive the experience and did not want anyone to hear the horrific truth of the deaths, and so created accounts that were more acceptable to save themselves and their relatives from this pain. Hearing someone close to them had died must have been traumatic enough, but to hear that they had died suffering must have been devastating. The letters that claimed that their soldiers had died quickly and painlessly were probably meant to provide a comfort to the relatives of those who died.

I had many experiences visiting cemeteries across France and Belgium, and the sense of loss imposed by the graves of the unknown soldiers had perhaps the largest impact of all. Learning so much about Stow allowed me to grasp a deep connection with his story, and seeing thousands of identical graves made me realise something very profound. Each grave represented one person, and each had their own story. The unknown soldiers were something different though, their stories would never be found. No one knew who they were. Their stories were as lost as their names. I thought about the family and friends of these soldiers, who would never know neither their final resting place nor what became of them. The sense of loss for these people must have been overwhelming. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier was completed 75 years after the Great War, and what it represents is tremendously important. It represents and commemorates all those who were lost at war, including those soldiers with no known grave, and those graves of unknown soldiers. The Unknown Soldier allows remembrance for all who were lost. He could be any one of them. He represents the thousands of soldiers who made the ANZAC legend. As Paul Keating said, he is all of them, and he is one of us.

Few events impact a nation in such a way that they change not only the generation of the time, but also many generations to follow. The ANZAC legend was such events. This legend is more than just facts; it is a collective story of thousands of people. The people who formed this were not necessarily the politicians nor the officers, but the ordinary soldiers. They are the Unknown Soldiers. The ANZAC legend developed and protected an anguished populace from the horrors they experienced. In doing so, it captured more than the facts of the time; it became a memoir of the people; it recorded their story; it shaped history.

22 Remembrance Day Speech, delivered by the Prime Minister, The Hon. P. J. Keating MP, at the funeral service of the Unknown Australian Soldier, 11th November 1993.
23 Ibid
The air had an icy bite, a freshness that I barely felt as I meandered across the grass of Heath cemetery. “In a small cemetery we made just beside our Regimental Aid post.” The special memorials were on the eastern side of the cemetery, just past the cross of sacrifice, beside a brick wall. For four generations Stow’s name had been passed down through my family, but none of my family had visited his grave before. I carried their sorrow, their grief, their remembrance. As I first saw the grave, I noticed something I did not expect. Just seven words, yet through them I experienced an immense feeling of loss. “Known to be buried in this cemetery.” His grave was lost. He was in some ways an unknown soldier, and in many ways the Unknown Soldier represents him.

24 Excerpt from a letter to Idonia Kentish about her brother’s death. In part it reads

“He was shot through the head by a lurking sniper in a small wood. There was no pain, death was instantaneous. That sniper only lived about ten minutes after his deed. Stow was afterwards carried back and buried with the rest of our lads who went home that day, in a small cemetery we made just beside our Regimental Aid post. That was half a mile from the village of Harbonniers. I am trying to get a map and if I succeed I will mark the place and send it to you.”

25 The cover photo is of me sitting beside Reginald Stow Kentish’s grave at Heath Cemetery.
Appendices:

Appendix 1: Photo of the scene presented to me as I gazed across Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium.
Annotated Bibliography:

Primary sources: Published


Lieutenant John 'Alec' Raws, 4 August 1916, Letter to Mr. Norman Bayles, Australian War Memorial Record Accessed from https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/2DRL0481.pdf [accessed 24th July 2013]. (This is a letter that contains explicit mention of the conditions at war. It also asks a very important question, ‘why should you people at home not know?’).

Remembrance Day Speech which outlined some of the key qualities of the ANZAC soldiers, delivered by the Prime Minister, The Hon. P. J. Keating MP, at the funeral service of the Unknown Australian Soldier, 11th November 1993. (In this speech Paul Keating speaks of some of the key qualities of ANZAC soldiers, it also contains some really interesting things about the ANZAC legend, and who the Unknown Soldier represents).


Primary sources: Unpublished

Captain Franks (1918). Letter to Idonia Kentish about her brother's death. (Family papers held by Margaret Day. This letter shows how close the bonds between soldiers were, as well as giving details on Reginald Stow Kentish’s death). Day, Margaret OAM, 17th August, 2012, First World War, (email from mday@picknowl.com.au to jarrah.day@gmail.com). (Margaret is my grandmother, daughter of Hugh Spencer Kentish and Jessie Millicent Kentish (nee Tomlins). This was a very useful correspondence because it gave ideas for sources, information about my relatives, various diaries, letters, and stories that had been passed down from her parents).
Day, Margaret OAM, 15th August, 2010, really true stories, (email from mday@picknowl.com.au to jarrah.day@gmail.com). (Contained transcript of letter to Idonia Kentish from Captain Franks about Stow’s death, and various stories about my great-grandparents.)

Kentish, 1914-1918. Various Letters and Diaries. (There are many family documents that are not specifically referenced in this essay, but reading through these letters and diaries has influenced me significantly. The letters sent home from Reginald Stow Kentish were specifically crucial in the development of the connection I feel with him).

Secondary sources:


T. Oberlies (1998). Die Religion des Ṛgveda. : Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien. Wien p155. (Contains information about the date of writing of the Indian text ‘ṛgveda’, this ancient text contains records of hymns and legends that are thought to have originated from before 1100 B.C.)

T. Tangherlini (1990) ”It Happened Not Too Far from Here...”: A Survey of Legend Theory and Characterization Western Folklore, Vol. 49, No. 4., p. 85. (This text has a lot of information about legends, their formation, and how they are altered).