

THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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The Politics of Heroism: Propaganda and Military Celebrity in First World War Australia

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Abstract

Afghanistan veteran Ben Roberts-Smith is one of the most well-known faces of modern conflict in Australia. The decorated special forces soldier is frequently at the forefront of commemorative initiatives, has become a spokesman for health and sport, and is popularly portrayed as the embodiment of the modern 'Anzac'. But Roberts-Smith's social currency as a hero is not a recent phenomenon. It has its origins in 1917, when decorated soldiers were first used to advertise the war effort. This was a tumultuous year for Australians deeply embroiled in the First World War. A failed conscription plebiscite—and another looming—and increasing devastation on the battlefield had led to a growing sense of war weariness. Amidst this discontent, the State Parliamentary Recruiting Committee of Victoria launched the Sportsmen's Thousand, an army recruitment initiative designed to encourage the enlistment of athletic men. The posters released for the campaign featured a portrait of a fit, young uniformed man—Lieutenant Albert Jacka, an accomplished sportsman and decorated 'war hero'. The Sportsmen's Thousand used Jacka to invoke the connection between masculinity and heroism by suggesting that talent on the sports field would translate to prowess on the field of battle, just as it had for Jacka. This article explores how 'heroes' like Jacka were increasingly used in Australian war propaganda and recruitment initiatives from 1917 to inspire enlistment and promote a sense of loyalty to the war effort. I argue that the success of these propaganda initiatives set the scene for the similar use of 'heroic' men throughout later conflicts, creating a legacy of the promotion of martial heroism and military celebrity that is reflected in Roberts-Smith's status today.

Keywords

1917; Australian Imperial Force; heroes; propaganda; recruitment; Victoria Cross

On a clear summer morning in January 2011, all attention at Campbell Barracks in Perth, Western Australia, was directed to Corporal Benjamin (Ben) Roberts-Smith of the elite Special Air Service Regiment (SASR). Before politicians, military dignitaries, and Roberts-Smith's family, the Governor-General of Australia presented the special forces soldier with the Victoria Cross for Australia; the premier award for heroism under the Australian Honours System. The medal recognised Roberts-Smith's actions in June 2010 when, subject to fierce small arms, machine gun, and rocket fire, he neutralised two machine gun posts and facilitated

the demise of a third during an assault on a Taliban compound in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan.¹

At the time of the investiture fellow SASR corporal and Victoria Cross for Australia recipient, Mark Donaldson, remarked that Roberts-Smith will 'get to shake a lot of hands and sign a lot of signatures'.² Donaldson was signalling a curious connection between martial heroism and celebrity. He was not wrong. In the years since his investiture, Roberts-Smith's social currency as a hero has only grown. He was, for instance, named the number-one ticket holder for the Fremantle Dockers Football Club in 2012, appears in the song 'Lest

1 'SAS Digger Awarded VC for Taking on Taliban', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 2011, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/sas-digger-awarded-vc-for-taking-on-taliban-20110123-1a0zd.html>; Craig Blanch and Aaron Pegram, *For Valour: Australians Awarded the Victoria Cross* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2018), 462–463.

2 Mark Donaldson, quoted in 'Victoria Cross for Soldier Who "Tore Into" Taliban', *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 23 January 2011, <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/national/victoria-cross-for-soldier-who-tore-into-taliban/story-e6frf7l6-1225993133252>.

We Forget' on country singer Lee Kernaghan's *Spirit of the Anzacs* album, and in 2015 was even featured on a postage stamp.³ He is also the patron of a number of sporting and service charities, and is frequently at the forefront of the Australian War Memorial's commemorative initiatives.⁴ Roberts-Smith has been transmogrified, as Chris Masters observes, from 'secret soldier to civic superman'—he represents the face of modern conflict and contemporary military celebrity in Australia.⁵ During this process, however, reports on Roberts-Smith's combat prowess have become somewhat sanitised; the aggressive and violent nature of the battlefield is downplayed, while more comfortable virtues such as courage, mateship, and sacrifice are emphasised in its place.

The overexuberant focus on military celebrity arguably obscures the realities of war. As historian Peter Stanley recently argued: 'The emphasis on "Anzac VC heroes" ensures that Australia sees glory in its war history rather than the horrific reality. Focusing on VCs helps us rise above the ruck of suffering and victimhood that characterised military work...'.⁶ While Stanley refers more to contemporary commemorations of the First World War, his words also hold true for modern martial heroes. But glorified representations of war and, indeed, military celebrity are not recent phenomena in Australia. Both, I argue, have origins in the First World War. The veneration of martial figures has a longer history, dating to the martial nationalism and imperial militarism of the nineteenth century, but it was from 1917 that recognised 'war heroes' became entangled in the politics of recruitment and propaganda in Australia. This article traces the roots of military celebrity in Australia to suggest that, amid the heavy casualties of the western front and the dampened popular enthusiasm for the war, men recognised for their heroism were increasingly featured or used in government propaganda, patriotic rallies, and recruitment drives as almost brand

ambassadors for the war effort. In doing so, these men were fêted, became respected symbols of heroic attainment, and served as the genesis of modern military celebrity in Australia.

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The martial nationalism and heroic reverence of the Victorian and Edwardian periods saw Australians react enthusiastically to the outbreak of the First World War. British culture at the turn of the century was profuse with what historian Graham Dawson has labelled the 'masculine pleasure-culture of war'.⁷ The aggressive imperialism, race patriotism, and militarism of the time manufactured the ideology of martial nationalism; a belief that war provided the purest test of nationhood and manhood.⁸ Such thinking was pervasive across the British Empire.⁹ In Australia, for instance, militaristic influences pervaded literature, the school curriculum, sporting ventures, children's toys, and even fashion. Graeme Davison argues that Australian schoolteachers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries 'took a keen interest in the cultivation of hero-worship'; youth were encouraged, urged even, to model themselves after the empire's soldiers, explorers, and martial heroes.¹⁰ Indeed, pupils were provided lessons on heroic or inspiring figures from the empire's history. The examples were not exclusively martial in form, but Sir Francis Drake, Viscount Nelson, and the Duke of Wellington filled out the list.¹¹ Instruction in courageous tales of empire suited middle-class objectives, because they nurtured youth who were versed in British triumphs and sacrifices, understood their heritage and, importantly, provided a source of inspiration. As the Reverend William Henry Fitchett wrote in the preface to his highly popular *Deeds That Won the Empire* (1897), such initiatives sought 'not to glorify war, but to nourish patriotism' and promote the 'finer qualities' of individual character.¹²

- 3 'Roberts-Smith the No 1 Ticket Holder at Freo', *WAtoday*, 20 March 2012, <https://www.watoday.com.au/sport/afl/robertsmith-the-no-1-ticket-holder-at-freo-20120320-1vgri.html>; Suzanne Siminot, 'Gold Coast's Lee Kernaghan's Anzac album "Incredibly Emotional" to Make', *Gold Coast Bulletin*, 30 March 2015, <https://www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au/entertainment/gold-coasts-lee-kernaghans-anzac-album-incredibly-emotional-to-make/news-story/6e144c5e4960e0d62d3545fd57effe71>; 'Australian Legends The Victoria Cross (2015)', Australia Post website, accessed 1 June 2019, <https://auspost.com.au/content/corp/collectables/stamp-issues/australian-legends-the-victoria-cross/>.
- 4 Blanch and Pegram, *For Valour*, 464.
- 5 Chris Masters, *No Front Line: Australia's Special Forces at War in Afghanistan* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2017), 480.
- 6 Peter Stanley, 'Australian Heroes: Some Military Mates Are More Equal Than Others', in *The Honest History Book*, ed. David Stephens and Alison Broinowski (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017), 205.
- 7 Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994), 236.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 1; Stefan Berger, 'Introduction: Towards a Global History of National Historiographies', in *Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective*, ed. Stefan Berger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5–6. See also Mark McKenna, 'The History Anxiety,' in *The Commonwealth of Australia*, vol. 2 of *The Cambridge History of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 561–580.
- 9 Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 82–83.
- 10 Graeme Davison, *The Use and Abuse of Australian History* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000), 23.
- 11 Craig Campbell, 'Schooling in Australia', in *Schooling in Oceania*, ed. Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherington (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 44.
- 12 W.T. Fitchett, *Deeds That Won the Empire: Historic Battle Scenes*, 3rd ed. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1897), v–vi.

Much of Australia was thus gripped by a patriotic and expectant fervour on the declaration of war. Union Jacks were flown across cities, nationalistic songs reverberated through public spaces, and much of the press encouraged patriotic zeal and martial sentiment.¹³ Opposition to the war did exist, but the few were drowned out by the vocal many. Australia's newspapers late in 1914 published official despatches from the western front alongside editorials and popular works of patriotism.¹⁴ As if to inspire visions of glory, the press also reported on the heroics performed during the early fighting in Europe.¹⁵ Australians were primed for the next generation of martial heroes; Homeric figures of the empire but, crucially, ones also from Australia. The Boer War of 1899–1902 had provided Australia's first wartime heroes, but the lack of romanticism and controversial tactics employed during the conflict failed to adequately galvanise or inspire Australians.¹⁶ Australian men were thus expected to deliver the national 'baptism' of fire and achieve martial glory in this fledgling European war.

Australia's initial commitment to the imperial war effort was the offer of an expeditionary force of 20,000 men in the form of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF).¹⁷ The Defence Act of 1903 restricted Australia's standing military to home defence, so the AIF's recruits were sourced from volunteers. Such was the early enthusiasm for the war that, by December 1914, 52,561 men had enlisted.¹⁸ This sense of eagerness was not to last. As historian Joan Beaumont argues, Australia was geographically remote from the main battlefields and disconnected from the threat of direct attack. Persuasion therefore provided the key means through which to achieve mass social mobilisation.¹⁹ The imagery of posters, text of pro-war articles in the press, and the cry of government slogans induced men to enlist and reassured the public that the war was righteous and in Australia's interest.

By 1917, however, the sense of righteousness, moral duty, and imperial loyalty was starting to falter. The Australian government was under increasing

pressure from the British War Cabinet to maintain reinforcements available for service on the war fronts. The AIF divisions on the western front were already understrength following the severe casualties of Fromelles, the Somme, and later Passchendaele. As war weariness began to set in at home, however, enlistments also plummeted. This shortfall posed a problem for the political ambitions of Prime Minister Billy Hughes, who desired a greater say in regional, dominion, and empire affairs.²⁰ The situation prompted an attempt by Hughes's Cabinet to introduce conscription. The divisive proposal was narrowly defeated in a plebiscite in October 1916. A second attempt was made fourteen months later, but in the meantime the Australian government had to turn to alternate means to stimulate recruitment and reinspire a sense of loyalty to the war effort.²¹

Propaganda and recruitment drives provided one solution. It was amid this sense of war weariness and discontent that the State Parliamentary Recruiting Committee of Victoria launched the Sportsmen's Thousand initiative in March 1917. The Sportsmen's Thousand was a targeted recruitment drive intended to mobilise 1,000 young athletes and sportsmen in the state of Victoria—a battalion's worth—by suggesting that talent on the sports field would translate to prowess on the field of battle. According to the Melbourne Argus, the drive would see sportsmen 'join together, train together, go to the motherland together, and, if the exigencies of war permit, fight together'.²² The drive thereby invoked pre-war notions of masculinity to construe the sporting ground as a training field for civility, gentlemanly behaviour, and war (Fig. 1).

The most notable aspect of the Sportsmen's drive, however, was the salient figure featured on many of the posters: Lieutenant Albert Jacka, an officer of the 14th Battalion AIF then serving on the western front.²³ Jacka was an accomplished cyclist and amateur boxer prior to the war, but he was (and remains) best known for being awarded Australia's first Victoria Cross (VC) of the

13 L.L. Robson, *The First A.I.F.: A Study of Its Recruitment, 1914–1918* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1970), 24.

14 Peter Stanley, 'Part III Society', in John Connor, Peter Stanley, and Peter Yule, *The War at Home*, vol. 4 of *The Centenary History of Australia in the Great War* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2015), 148.

15 See, for example: 'Victoria Cross', *Argus* (Melbourne), 24 December 1914; 'Renaming Germanton', *Argus* (Melbourne), 19 June 1915.

16 Carolyn Holbrook, 'Nationalism and War Memory in Australia', in *Australia and the Great War: Identity, Memory and Mythology* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2016), 220–221.

17 Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2013), 12–16; Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War*, vol. 11 of *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, 7th ed. (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1941), 11.

18 Michael McKernan, *Australians at Home: World War I* (Scoresby: Five Mile Press, 2014), 3.

19 Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, 48–49, 103–109.

20 *Ibid.*, 446–50; Jean Bou and Peter Dennis, *The Australian Imperial Force*, vol. 5 of *The Centenary History of Australia in the Great War* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2016), 72.

21 Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, 219–248.

22 'Sportsmen's Thousand', *Argus* (Melbourne), 8 March 1917.

23 See, for example, 'Enlist in the Sportsmen's Thousand', Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee, 1917, ARTV00026, Australian War Memorial, Canberra (hereafter AWM); 'Which? Man You Are Wanted!', Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee, 1917, ARTV05005, AWM.



Figure 1. In this Sportsmen's poster Albert Jacka provides a source of inspiration and a leader to the myriad sportsmen arranged in the background. Troedel & Cooper, 'Enlist in the Sportsmen's Thousand. Show the Enemy What Australian Sporting Men Can Do,' Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee of Victoria, 1917. H2001.34/1, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

war. The VC has since been superseded in Australia by the Victoria Cross for Australia, but at the time of the First World War it was the highest award for bravery in the British Empire; a status it maintains in the United Kingdom. Jacka received the medal for his heroism in singlehandedly retaking a trench amid rigorous Ottoman resistance during the Gallipoli campaign in 1915.²⁴ The publicity that Jacka's VC generated meant he was a well-known figure across Australia, particularly in his home state of Victoria. The Sportsmen's Thousand sought to make use of this local connection and affinity for Jacka. Backed by the Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee, the Victorian Cricket Association, and the Director-General of Recruiting, the Sportsmen's Thousand was launched at a rally in West Melbourne Stadium (now Festival Hall) on 16 March 1917. Between boxing exhibitions,

vaudeville, and band music, the inaugural rally achieved the drive's first twenty recruits.²⁵ Over the following months, the chief organisers of the Sportsmen's Thousand hosted numerous recruiting rallies across Melbourne and regional Victoria. By all accounts the rallies were well attended, well publicised events that attracted the attention of the public and the press.²⁶

The Sportsmen's Thousand closely mirrored earlier government-sanctioned recruitment drives in Australia. Carmichael's Thousand, instigated by and named for the senior New South Wales politician Ambrose Carmichael (who himself enlisted), had been raised in New South Wales through recruiting rallies in 1915. The Carmichael and Sportsmen initiatives also led to a Ryan's Thousand, christened after the Queensland premier, and a second Carmichael's Thousand in 1918 (after a decorated

24 Ian Grant, *Jacka V.C.: Australia's Finest Fighting Soldier* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982), 25.

25 'Sportsmen's Thousand'; 'Need for Men', *Argus* (Melbourne), 17 March 1917.

26 See, for example, 'Sportsmen's Thousand', *Ballarat Star*, 1 June 1917; 'Sportsmen's Thousand Military Band', *Inglewood Advertiser*, 18 September 1917; 'Sportsman's Thousand', *Malvern Standard*, 1 December 1917.



Figure 2. Note the significance accorded to Jacka and his Victoria Cross in the imagery of the Sportsmen's Thousand campaign. Troedel & Cooper, 'Enlist in the Sportsmen's 1000. Play up and Play the Game,' Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee of Victoria, 1917. H2001.34/3a, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

Carmichael had returned home to convalesce).²⁷ Targeted recruitment drives that made use of local, notable personalities therefore had some precedent. But unlike the Carmichael and Ryan initiatives, Jacka was not a noted politician. The Sportsmen's Thousand was the first government-sanctioned propaganda in Australia to feature a VC recipient or, indeed, a decorated and recognisable soldier. By placing Jacka in the same league as socially prominent and influential people, the Sportsmen's Thousand highlighted Jacka's social currency as a recipient of the VC and cemented his status as a modern martial celebrity.

In this sense, the Sportsmen's Thousand differed from other Australian recruitment and propaganda initiatives. The Carmichael and Ryan drives, as with much of Australia's earlier recruitment propaganda, appealed to a sense of duty, loyalty and, in some cases, guilt to recruit men to the war effort and legitimise Australia's participation in the conflict.²⁸ Such tactics were most prominent in atrocity propaganda, which was used to highlight real or manufactured German atrocities against Belgian civilians and prisoners of war to demonise the Germans as an almost bestial and barbaric enemy.²⁹ Atrocity propaganda generated what Heather Jones has

27 Bede Nairn, 'Carmichael, Ambrose Campbell (1866–1953)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 8 April 2019, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/carmichael-ambrose-campbell-5506>; Beaumont, *Broken Nation*, 420–22.

28 Emily Robertson, 'Propaganda at Home (Australia)', in 1914–1918–online, *International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 17 February 2015. doi: 10.15463/ie1418.

29 Emily Robertson, 'Propaganda and "Manufactured Hatred": A Reappraisal of the Ethics of First World War British and Australian Propaganda', *Public Relations Inquiry* 3, no. 2 (2014): 246.

labelled 'war culture' in Britain and the Dominions, which in turn fostered a hatred for the enemy.³⁰ However, in most of these propaganda campaigns—atrocities or otherwise—nameless figures adorned the posters. Not so with the Sportsmen's Thousand. As a VC recipient and recognised 'war hero', Jacka's presence at the centre of the Sportsmen's campaign lent a sense of legitimacy, of inspiration, and of aspirational encouragement to potential enlistees.

This stimulus can be seen in the posters created for the drive. Jacka's likeness is conspicuous in many of the artworks, and so too is the VC. In one poster an arrow points to the VC on Jacka's chest, proclaiming it to be 'The medal of all medals'³¹ (Fig. 2). Evidently, it was a reward that all sporting men should desire and prize above any other. Indeed, there was an expectation that the Sportsmen would win a cache of medals on the battlefield. In December 1917, just one month after the first Sportsmen had embarked from Australia, the *Newcastle Morning Herald* reported: 'It is anticipated by those who compose the Sportsmen's Thousand that ... numerous military decorations, perhaps including a Victoria Cross or two, will be amongst their honours of war'.³² The confidence in these men was so great that Agar Wynne, a senior Victorian politician and an executive of the Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee, pledged £500 (approximately AU\$48,815 in 2019 terms) to the first man to win the VC.³³ No Sportsman would claim this prize, but the experience mirrored that of Jacka. On the outbreak of war in 1914, prominent Melbourne businessman John Wren had promised £500 and a gold watch to the AIF's first recipient of the VC—a prize that was duly claimed by Jacka.³⁴

Jacka's presence at the centre of the Sportsmen's Thousand lent a sense of legitimacy and inspiration to the drive, and saw it transcend social boundaries. Sporting connotations of the time were typically grounded in the middling classes, but the working-class Jacka ensured the campaign had a wider appeal and some measure of success. The campaign also used Jacka, a soldier who had killed and who had been wounded multiple times, as almost a brand ambassador to present a glorified and sanitised representation of war. In doing so, the

Sportsmen's Thousand established a precedent for the use of 'war heroes' for political purposes.

Almost simultaneous to the Sportsmen's drive was the pro-conscription activism of Arthur Blackburn. As a second lieutenant in the 10th Battalion AIF, Blackburn had won the VC at Pozières in 1916 for leading fifty men to clear some 370 yards of trench in what he later described as 'the biggest bastard of a job I have ever struck'.³⁵ Illness forced Blackburn's return to Australia late in 1916, where he was discharged in April. He was not idle for long. In May 1917 he was elected Vice-President of the Returned Soldiers' Association (forerunner of the Returned and Services League) in South Australia. By September he was state president and, in April 1918, he was elected to the South Australian parliament.³⁶ From these platforms Blackburn became an advocate for the welfare of soldiers and, according to his biographer Andrew Faulkner, made use of 'his new celebrity to promote the war effort by speaking at recruiting rallies'.³⁷

In a manner not too dissimilar to the Sportsmen's drive, Blackburn spent much of the remainder of the war touring Adelaide and regional South Australia to inspire recruitment and relay the merits of conscription. In one rally at Kapunda in March 1917, Blackburn gave an impassioned speech on the merits of enlistment, conscription, and imperial loyalty. Blackburn claimed that, by the time he left Britain in October 1916, 'the entire manhood of England was mobilized, and there was scarcely a single man in the place who was not in khaki'.³⁸ Although clearly a hyperbolic statement, Blackburn was looking to Britain and its policy of conscription as the standard to emulate. He was not the only one. Sergeant George Howell, who won the VC for his devastating work with bombs and bayonet at Bullecourt in 1917, appeared at rallies in regional New South Wales in 1918 to similarly stimulate recruitment.³⁹ To the general populace, Blackburn's and Howell's authority as voices from the trenches were lent even further credence and held in greater esteem because they possessed the social currency of the VC. This phenomenon was observed by one regional newspaper in 1918: 'apparently the one thing townspeople desired to show was their high

30 Heather Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 38–39, 62–67.

31 'Enlist in the Sportsmen's 1000', Sportsmen's Recruiting Committee, 1917, ARTV05616, AWM.

32 'The Victoria Cross', *Newcastle Morning Herald*, 29 December 1917.

33 '£500 for V.C. Winner', *Bendigo Independent*, 8 August 1917; Reserve Bank of Australia, 'Pre-Decimal Inflation Calculator', Reserve Bank of Australia website, accessed 27 April 2020, <https://www.rba.gov.au/calculator/annualPreDecimal.html>.

34 Grant, *Jacka, V.C.*, 33–35.

35 Recommendation for Lieutenant Arthur Blackburn, 29 July 1916, AWM28, 1/5 PART 3; Arthur Blackburn to Guy Fisher, 4 September 1916, 3DRL/6392, AWM.

36 Andrew Faulkner, *Arthur Blackburn, VC: An Australian Hero, His Men, and Their Two World Wars* (Kent Town: Wakefield Press, 2008), 120–129, 139.

37 *Ibid.*, 123.

38 Arthur Blackburn, paraphrased in 'Appeals for Recruits', *Kapunda Herald*, 16 March 1917.

39 'Sergt. Howell, V.C.', *Western Champion* (Parkes, New South Wales), 13 June 1918; 'Sergeant Howell, V.C. and M.M.', *Lachlander and Condobolin District Recorder*, 5 June 1918.

appreciation of the efforts of the Australian Army and men of the type of Sergeant Howell'.⁴⁰

The Australian government was evidently aware of the inspirational pull commanded by the VC and its recipients. In June 1918 the Department of Defence, with backing from its minister George Pearce and Prime Minister Hughes, raised a proposal to grant three months furlough to Australia to the AIF's VC recipients still on active duty. The request was purely political, as it was intended that these men 'would give great fillip to recruiting'.⁴¹ By this stage of the war, conscription had again been rejected, enlistments had further slumped, and several battalions on the western front were being forced to merge or disband due to lack of personnel.⁴² The proposal garnered widespread support among the AIF's senior command, with Major General John Gellibrand venturing so far as to declare that the men 'would have a stimulating effect on the recruiting movement'.⁴³

At the time of the request 37 Australian personnel had received the VC, of whom 18 were still on active duty overseas.⁴⁴ Divisional commanders were instructed to consult with the VC recipients under their command, with the strict stipulation that '[n]o officer or man is to be retained with his unit on the ground that he cannot be spared'.⁴⁵ Of the 18, four were indisposed and three—including Albert Jacka—refused outright. The eleven amenable to the offer embarked from London in August. A further six sailed for Australia over the following two months. As the men made the journey home, Secretary of the Department of Defence, Thomas Trumble, instructed the commandants of each of the state-based Military Districts to liaise with their State Recruiting Committee 'with a view to taking ... such advantage from [the VC's] stay ... as may be secured from a recruiting point of view'.⁴⁶ However, as the first group of men did

not arrive home until October, they had but a limited effect on recruiting before the fighting came to an end on 11 November 1918. The intended recruiting drive, nevertheless, was not the final use of heroic figures or the VC for propaganda purposes in the present war, for Jacka was again to be featured on a poster: this time for peace bonds. The message was broadly similar to earlier initiatives, conveying that Jacka had given his all, 'kept his pledge', and now it was the public's turn.⁴⁷

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The VC-oriented propaganda and recruitment initiatives from 1917 created a distinct legacy for the promotion of martial heroism and military celebrity in Australia. The use of the VC and its recipients for propaganda purposes was purposeful, for it coincided with increasing awareness and veneration of the VC in Australia and came at a time when the war effort was in crisis. Schemes such as the Sportsmen's Thousand served to glorify decorated personnel and their achievements, while simultaneously shrouding the war in sanitised imagery to make the fighting fronts more palatable to the public. In doing so, the propaganda and recruiting campaigns reinforced the notability of the VC and propelled these modern 'war heroes' into the realm of military celebrity. Indeed, the men were widely recognised, venerated, and accepted as almost authoritative brand ambassadors. The use of men like Blackburn and Howell and initiatives such as the Sportsmen's Thousand also inspired the similar use of VC recipients and decorated personnel for propaganda purposes in the Second World War and later conflicts. The legacy of which can still be seen in Australia, in the privileged status, social currency, and celebrity that modern heroic figures like Ben Roberts-Smith experience (or perhaps endure) today.

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40 'Sergeant Howell, V.C. and M.M.'

41 Department of Defence to General Sir William Birdwood, cablegram, 26 June 1918, MP367/1, 556/33/51, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), Canberra.

42 Bou and Dennis, *Australian Imperial Force*, 17.

43 Major General John Gellibrand to Headquarters Australian Corps, 11 July 1918, AWM26, 449/3, AWM.

44 Of the remaining 19, eleven had been killed in action or died of wounds and eight had already returned to Australia. Brigadier General Thomas Griffiths, Commandant AIF Headquarters London, to AIF Headquarters France, 28 June 1918, AWM26, 449/3, AWM.

45 Brigadier General Thomas Dodds, Deputy Adjutant General AIF, to headquarters Australian divisions, 25 July 1918, AWM26, 449/3, AWM.

46 Memoranda by Thomas Trumble to the commandants of the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th Military Districts, 25 September 1918, MP367/1, 556/33/51, NAA, Canberra.

47 'He Kept His Pledge', Commonwealth Government of Australia, c. 1918–19, ARTV00784, AWM.

