

## Jacka VC: Australian Hero

Robert Macklin

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

Albert Jacka never recorded his ideas, beliefs or goals. He kept a diary only of his time at Gallipoli and it contains only brief factual accounts of events. Robert Macklin has made up for this by combing the historical records in which Jacka is mentioned, or in which he or his unit, the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion, are recorded. Macklin has also made good use of Australian War Memorial records and the relevant general histories of the war. His painstaking research provides strong background material on the 14th Battalion, the Gallipoli campaign, the battalion's actions in Belgium and France, and finally, of life in Melbourne during the 1920s and the Great Depression. His examination of the historical context, events and actions of Jacka has enabled Macklin to write a powerful and highly readable account.

At an Australian War Memorial dinner, Macklin was shocked when a junior member of the Army History Unit declared that Jacka was a 'social misfit'. He notes that it should not have shocked him so much, given that it mirrored the attitudes of those who, during the war, were profoundly challenged by Jacka's attitudes and resistance to sending his mates needlessly to their deaths.

This experience and his research forced Macklin to grapple with the profound questions of bravery and the nature of the hero. He has not given us the definitive explanation of what motivates or forms a hero, but in his examination of Jacka, he identifies much of the unique nature of heroism and its impact on the life of the hero.

Albert Jacka grew up in Wedderburn in rural Victoria. He completed primary school, where he often took the role of protecting his brothers from bullies. Indeed, he carried this quality of 'family' throughout his life – at home, in the AIF and later in civil life. His family were to be led, encouraged and protected. After leaving school, he worked in the timber industry. This hard physical work and competition in cycling races and boxing gave him a strong sense of self-confidence and a fierce determination to win.

He enlisted on 8 September 1914 and the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion became his 'family' for the duration of the war. The battalion arrived in Egypt at the beginning of February 1915 and undertook repeated route marches through the desert in roasting heat. Jacka had made a strong impact on his mates during this team-building phase and, now an Acting Lance Corporal, began to study for promotion.

During the fighting at Gallipoli on 19-20 May 1915 a dozen Turks broke into the Australian trenches. Jacka on his own initiative flanked the Turk's position and cleared the trench by bayoneting two and shooting five. His heroic action meant that the frontline held. For this action at Courtney's Post he became the first member of the AIF to win a Victoria Cross.

In Australia news of Jacka's VC was received with great excitement and helped to offset concern over the appalling number of casualties. In the 14<sup>th</sup> Jacka, who had been considered an outstanding fighter, took on the role of a VC winner in a quiet and humble way.

Later on the Western Front in August 1916, attacking German forces on Pozieres Ridge had swept past Jacka's platoon and a group of Australians were being rounded up as prisoners. Jacka led a small group in a counter-attack, defeating the German escort and taking 42 prisoners. His action was the equal of any meriting the award of a VC. Jacka, severely wounded, was eventually hospitalised in London and was awarded a Military Cross. At Bullecourt in April 1917 Jacka again demonstrated a high order of tactical and leadership skills, and repeatedly put himself at risk leading his company, giving direction to the battalion and trying to make the accompanying tanks effective. These outstanding efforts gained him a second MC.

Macklin supports C.E.W. Bean's view that Jacka deserved three VCs for his heroism. He puts his case into the context of Jacka's rise in rank from junior NCO to captain and company commander. His increased assertiveness, resistance to poor planning and criticism of some of his senior officers are seen as reasons for Jacka being given lesser awards and in being passed over for promotion. This, Macklin argues, embittered Jacka who considered himself well-trained and battle-skilled enough to take up higher commands.

Although heroism is recognised in actions, it derives from the nature of the person. The hero sets standards for their own conduct and meets these through their behaviour. Having been recognised for a high standard of conduct they then seek to live the role. They will demand the best of others but not demand the same level of conduct. The hero becomes identified with the award. Jacka is reported to have said after Bullecourt – 'after all I am a VC'.

Returning to civil life Jacka successfully ran a business, and was active in the RSL and the Masonic Lodge. He was elected Mayor of St Kilda in 1930 but the economic war of the Great Depression gradually wore him down. Weakened by war wounds, bankrupt, and his marriage ruined he died aged thirty-nine in January 1932. ♦

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