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One more word



Nursing Sister Clare Deacon MM

Life sentences - stories of heroism

Dr KAREN FOX, PhD '09 explores stories of heroism in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

One of the delights of biographical research is discovering the extraordinary incidents in another person's life.

Recently, while researching the life of eminent mining engineer and company director Sir John Proud (1907-1997), I discovered the fascinating account of how he survived a plane crash in remote bush in the McPherson Ranges in southeast Queensland in 1937.

He was found, seriously injured, by a local man, Alfonso Bernard O'Reilly (1903-1975), who had been searching for the downed aircraft. O'Reilly walked 16 kilometres through the rainforest to summon help, and aided rescuers to stretch out Proud and another survivor, Joseph Binstead.

Inspired by O'Reilly's story, I set out to uncover other examples of individual heroism in the *ADB*.

Perhaps most obvious are those to emerge in times of armed conflict. Many individuals who performed feats of bravery in wartime are to be found in the *ADB*. Among these are holders of the Victoria Cross such as John Woods Whittle (1882-1946), who received the distinction for his actions at Boursies and Lagnicourt in April 1917. Later, in 1934, he also rescued a little boy from drowning.

A striking case of wartime heroism is that of nurses Dorothy Gwendolen Cawood (1884-1962), Clare Deacon (1891-1952) and Alice Ross-King (1887-1968) who, along with Mary Jane Derrer, saved patients from buildings set alight by the bombing of the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station in July 1917. All four were subsequently awarded the Military Medal.

Some wartime stories have become iconic. Many Australians know the story of John Simpson Kirkpatrick (1892-1915), remembered as 'the man with the donkey'. After landing on Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, he and his donkey carried wounded soldiers back to the beach through rifle fire and shrapnel, before he was killed on 19 May.

Also to be found in the *ADB* are tales of aquatic bravery. In 1927, 18-year-old Stanley Frederick Gibbs (1909-1991) received the Albert Medal after fighting with a shark in an unsuccessful attempt to save the life of a teenage swimmer at Port Hacking.

There are some more unusual tales as well. Take, for example, the actions of Raymond Tasman Donoghue (1920-1960), a Hobart conductor who tried to stop a runaway tram. Damaged in a collision with a truck, and with its brakes failed, the tram raced downhill and along the city's main street. Rather than trying to protect himself, Donoghue moved passengers to the other end of the vehicle, and stationed himself in the cab, attempting to work the handbrake and using the warning gong to alert other traffic. When it hit another tram, he died instantly and 43 passengers were hurt.

Or the incredible experience of aviator (Sir) Patrick Gordon Taylor (1896-1966) when acting as navigator for Sir Charles Kingsford Smith in May 1935. Six hours into their flight, the starboard propeller was badly damaged. With oil pressure dropping on the port engine, and the situation looking grim, Taylor climbed out of the plane and made his way to the starboard engine, managing to retrieve oil from it, and then put it into the port engine.

He did this six times with help from John Stannage, the wireless operator, enabling the plane to reach Sydney and land successfully.

Read more in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* at adb.anu.edu.au.