

# WE CAN BE HEROES

**T**HE FIRST 10 DAYS AT GALLIPOLI WERE “perfect Hell”, wrote Alexander Jamieson Meikle, the 49-year-old Captain in command of the 4th Field Ambulance, from Anzac Cove to his mate Fred Puckridge back in South Australia on July 7, 1915. Yet the Port Lincoln GP went on, “I wouldn’t have missed this expedition for all I’ve got – it has an unholy attraction for me”.

Unholy or otherwise, Gallipoli has had an attraction for most Australians for the 95 years since Dr Meikle put pen to paper in the trenches. Nine Australians were awarded the British Empire’s highest honour for valour, the Victoria Cross, during the military campaign that many say defined Australia as a nation.

The VCs will be on display at the State Library’s Treasures Wall in *This company of brave men: the Gallipoli VCs*, the Australian War Memorial’s 95th anniversary touring show from June 25 to August 8.

All the VC recipients were by definition exceptional men. But around them the Library has built an exhibition of its own that shows how World War I shaped the everyday lives of South Australians in extraordinary times.

“There isn’t any gore or thunder,” says Carolyn Spooner, curator of the Library’s complementary exhibition. “However, the travelling exhibition has given us a wonderful opportunity to highlight the Library’s resources such as letters and diaries, most of which have been donated by the community for safekeeping.”

No South Australians won VCs at Gallipoli, although five were accorded the ultimate honour later in the supposed war to end all wars. Captain Arthur Blackburn, Sergeants Reginald Inwood and Joergen Jensen and Lance Corporals Philip Davey and Lawrence Weathers are commemorated in an Australian Infantry Forces souvenir guide compiled for the Citizens and Business Men’s Committee.

Ross Smith didn’t receive a VC. But he was awarded the Military Cross twice and the Distinguished Flying Cross three times before he and his brother Keith became international peacetime heroes when they flew from England to Australia in less than a month in 1919. The brothers were knighted for their achievement.

Sir Ross Smith was a genuine fearless flyboy. In 1917, writing home from Egypt to “Mother dearest” Jessie he said, “If we strike trouble ... I am going in my fast machine and will give any Hun more than he wants if he comes looking for it. It is a fairly risky

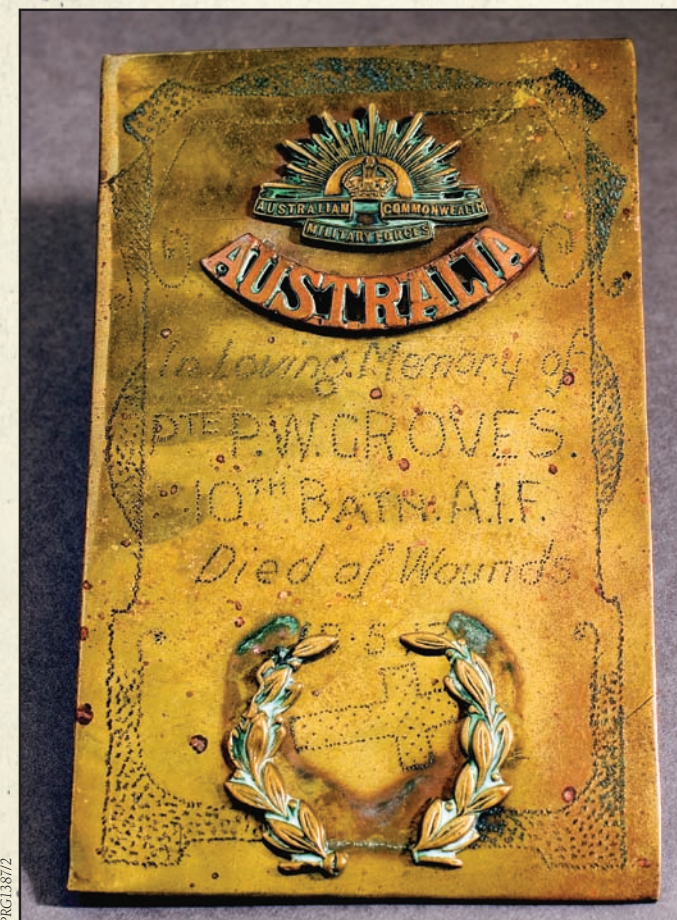


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**Top:** Keith Smith’s Flying Corps forage cap. **Centre:** Trench art made of rolled out brass shell casing to commemorate Private Philip Groves of Henley Beach, who died of wounds in France in May 1917. **Bottom:** Violet Day badges collected by Ms Lottie Michell. The first Violet Day was held on July 2, 1915 when tiny bouquets of violets were sold to benefit returned soldiers.

**Opposite page:** From a collection of 95 photographs believed taken by South Australian R. Woolford during his war service.

“I WOULDN’T HAVE MISSED THIS EXPEDITION FOR ALL I’VE GOT – IT HAS AN UNHOLY ATTRACTION FOR ME.”

Captain Alexander Jamieson Meikle,  
Gallipoli 1915

job I know but my usual good luck will carry me through I hope. Very much love dear. Your loving Ruff.” Sir Ross died in a test flight accident in 1922. Keith’s Flying Corps forage cap is in the show.

What we now know as “Aussie humour” has been around a long time, and may well have been nurtured to maturity on the killing fields of the Great War. *Aussie, the Australian Soldiers’ Magazine*, of October 1918, contains satirical advertisements for prisoner of war cages and sightseeing on the battlefield.

“Why send your prisoner away after you have gone to the trouble of securing them?” asks one. “Buy a POW cage and keep your prisoners yourself.” The other offers, “The Ayieff’s personally conducted tours across the wilds of No Man’s Land into the heart of the wire jungles and hidden lairs of the savage Hun.

“Enjoy the latest sport of pill-box strafing ... while the flares last.”

South Australians kept the home fires burning on fronts of their own. Australians suffered less from trench related ailments such as trench foot than other soldiers because they were sent more – and better – socks. Instructions on how to knit socks for the troops are in the show. So too are the minutes of the Exhibition Sewing Circle run by a Miss Racey Beaver, which made protective veils for Army horses.

With blokes fighting the war or in essential services, league football was suspended from 1916 until 1919. That didn’t stop the womenfolk from having a go. “North Adelaide v. South Adelaide, come and see these girls play football on the Jubilee Oval, 3 p.m. To-day,” went the 1918 newspaper ad for the trench comforts fundraiser. Even the Governor, Sir Henry Galway, went along.

Anita, Lady Smith, Sir Keith’s widow, gave Sir Ross’s wartime letters to the State Library. It’s a common tale, says Carolyn Spooner. South Australians are pretty good at alerting the Library to historical material. Even so, many people might not be aware of the scope of the Library’s interests. “We are using this exhibition to highlight the State Library’s resources,” Carolyn says. “We hope it will help people realise how much we collect and preserve.” While not everything the community offers will be collected, she adds, all will be assessed.

Writing to Fred Puckridge from Gallipoli, Alexander Jamieson Meikle mused on civilian life, “should I be fortunate enough to return”. He did, and devoted part of his later medical career to shell shocked soldiers. Dr Meikle died in 1954. No VC, but he was mentioned in despatches.