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14:01 Tuesday 19 May 2015

DIGNITARIES from across the globe gathered in South Tyneside today to pay homage to heroic 'Sanddancer' - exactly one hundred years after his death.

History hung heavy in the air as a service of commemoration was staged to mark the centenary of Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick's passing.

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HAVE YOUR SAY



The Australian High Commissioner, the Hon Alexander Downer AC, visits South Tyneside as part of a commemorative service marking 100 years to the day Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick died in 1915.

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The South Shields-born soldier was killed by a Turkish sniper at Gallipoli on May 19, 1915, at the height of World War One.

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As a member of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) he is recognised



Before his death the stretcher bearer had helped save the lives of an estimated 300 of his colleagues - carrying them to safety on Army donkeys.

The high esteem in which he is held was witnessed yesterday when the Honourable Alexander Downer, High Commissioner for Australia to the United Kingdom, and Rob Taylor, the deputy High Commissioner for New Zealand to the UK, attended the commemorative service beside the Kirkpatrick statue in the town's Ocean Road, where wreaths were laid amidst the playing of The Last Post by buglers from the Durham Light Infantry.



John Simpson Kirkpatrick at Shrapnel Gully.

With darkening skies above the congregation of more than one hundred later made its way to the town's Littlehaven Promenade for a service of dedication and the unveiling of a plaque in memory of more than 100 soldiers from Tyneside who lost their lives during the Gallipoli campaign.

The seafront setting was an entirely appropriate one, as Kirkpatrick often walked donkeys on Littlehaven beach as a youth.

Mr Downer said: "I think Simpson would have been astonished by a day like this and people making all this fuss about him. He would probably think he was just a local lad who did his duty.

"He was a very egalitarian sort of bloke by all accounts and he would have fitted in well in the Australian Army, but I think he'd be astonished by all the attention paid to him. Most brave people are like that, they're not usually vain people.



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"I always say that Simpson, as we call him in Australia, was the bravest man, at least in the Australian Army, never to win a Victoria Cross. During the First World War quite a few Australians won VC's. A lot of people said he should have been honoured in that way, but there have been inquiries over the years and there are all sorts of technical rules that have to be followed and it doesn't seem that is possible.

"I think it is a wonderful thing that they do remember him here in South Shields and it shows that over the years how completely integrated Australia and the UK have become. Yeah, he was a Brit but he was saving Australian and New Zealand lives."

Mr Taylor, on his first visit to South Shields, said the town's coast reminded him of his own New Zealand homeland.

He said; "Kirkpatrick and his donkey didn't just bring Australians down to the beach, he brought many New Zealanders as well. New Zealand has another link with South Shields, Sir William Fox, who was the second premier during colonial times, came from Westoe and he has an important figure in our history too."



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Coun Fay Cunningham, the Mayor of South Tyneside, said: "Today is a very special occasion. It is absolutely fantastic that we have got the high commissioners from Australia and New Zealand here and it shows how important John Simpson Kirkpatrick is to those nations. What really made it special for me today is that we had children from Laygate and Mortimer schools singing today - they are the schools that Kirkpatrick attended. It was bringing history full circle."

It was something of a "Kirkpatrick-fest" for the mayor yesterday, who last night went on to attend the performance of a play based on Kirkpatrick's life. The Man and the Donkey, being staged at the Customs House in South Shields.

Earlier at the service of commemoration, the Reverend Paul Kennedy, of St Michael and All Angels Church in South Shields, reflected on the qualities that set Kirkpatrick apart.

He said: "We remember especially Private John Simpson Kirkpatrick whose steadfastness and selfless courage at Gallipoli in 1915 were an example to all and a model of Christian charity, and whose death in action one hundred years ago we honour today.

"We remember too the servicemen from Tyneside and all nations who fought and died in the Gallipoli campaign, and we give thanks for the reconciliation that now prevails among the former combatants of the Great War."

South Tyneside schools, war veterans and military organisations were also in attendance at yesterday's events to mark the centenary of the death of a Great War hero from South Shields.



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The life of a hero

Kirkpatrick was born on July 6, 1892 in Bertram Street, South Shields, to Scottish parents Sarah Kirkpatrick (née Simpson) and Robert Kirkpatrick.

He was one of eight children, and worked with donkeys on the town's beach as a youth.

In early 1909 he joined the British Merchant Navy but in May 1910 he deserted at Newcastle in New South Wales and then travelled widely in Australia.

Simpson enlisted in the Australian Army after the outbreak of war, apparently as a means of returning to England,

He enlisted as "John Simpson", and may have dropped his real surname to avoid being identified as a deserter and became a field ambulance stretcher bearer.

Simpson landed on the Gallipoli Peninsula on April 25, 1915, as part of the ANZAC forces.

In the early hours of the following day, as he was bearing a wounded comrade on his shoulders, he spotted a donkey and quickly began making use of it to carry his fellow soldiers.

It was estimated he and his donkeys rescued more than 300 injured soldiers from the frontline to the beach for evacuation.

For three weeks he defied orders for ambulance men not to go out when enemy fire was at its worst.

He cheerfully continued to ferry them through a dangerous route called Snipers Alley – usually whistling or singing along the way – before being shot dead by a Turkish sniper on May 19, 1915.

There have been several petitions over the decades to have Simpson awarded a Victoria Cross or Victoria Cross for Australia.

But in February, 2013, a tribunal set up by the Australian government recommended that no further award be made to Simpson, since his "initiative and bravery were representative of all other stretcher-bearers of 3rd Field Ambulance, and that bravery was appropriately recognised as such by the award of a Mentioned In Despatches (MID)."


Kirkpatrick's heroic story has inspired numerous songs and plays about himself and his trusty donkey companion.

The statue depicting Kirkpatrick and his donkey was sculpted by local artist Bob Olley, and installed in South Shields Town Centre in January 1988.


A small reproduction of the sculpture was sent to the Australian Prime Minister, Bob Hawke on the 75th anniversary of Gallipoli in 1990.




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