

The essence of the spirit: Diggers talk

The Digger' is a key piece of the complex jigsaw puzzle that makes up 'The Australian'. However, defining the Digger is like defining 'class': it's hard to describe, but you know it when you see it. The Digger is an Australian Everyman. Soldiers are only as good as, and reflect, the community from which they are drawn. Australians have the essence of the Digger within them. The spirit emerges when the individual calls on it in times of need.

The image of the Digger is derived from an intricate amalgam of qualities: each has been proven in the heat of battle and has been personified at various times by remarkable members of the tribe. Chief among these qualities are mateship, courage, compassion, endurance, selflessness, loyalty, resourcefulness, devotion, independence, ingenuity, audacity, coolness, larrikinism and humour.

Mateship is the essential binding force of the Digger, and examples of it are legion: from the two Light Horsemen at The Nek at Gallipoli, who swapped places with other Diggers in the line so they could charge to their deaths shoulder to shoulder, through to 'Dasher' Wheatley's refusal to leave his wounded mate's side in Vietnam in the face of certain death. The Diggers' mateship extends beyond comradeship. It develops into a mutual respect and acquires an almost spiritual quality, which binds men for life. It enables them either to

embrace or to overlook their mates' foibles and to draw on a seemingly limitless depth of commitment to each other. It helps to form teams with a combined strength far exceeding the sum of those of the members.

Courage, both physical and moral, is a core element. It comes in many forms: from the sustained inspirational bravery of men like Albert Jacka in World War I, who by all accounts won his VC many times over, to the timeless valour of Bruce Kingsbury, who charged into immortality on the Kokoda Track. But most Diggers recognise the crucial value of moral courage and accord it a respect, albeit often underplayed, that surprises many observers.

When you think of **compassion**, you think of Diggers like 'Weary' Dunlop and his fellow doctors on the Burma-Thailand Railway, Bruce Hunt, Albert Coates, Roy Mills and others as they tended to their frail mates in unspeakable conditions. You think of the way Diggers across the years have been able to switch without difficulty from the role of the warrior to that of the peacekeeper or the rescuer or the rebuilders of shattered lives in times of disaster.

Diggers from all wars have drawn on reserves of **endurance**, which have enabled them to overcome odds that would have defeated lesser soldiers: from the original Anzacs during their eight-month nightmare at Gallipoli to the prisoners of war who endured years of despair and cruelty. From the hellholes of the Somme to the Rats of Tobruk, Diggers have endured unimaginable privations to ultimately triumph against all the odds. Men like John Metson, who, shot through both ankles, crawled for two weeks through the New Guinea jungle rather than burden his mates, symbolise the levels of endurance to which the spirit of the Digger can rise.

The **selflessness** of men like Simpson with his life-saving donkey on the slopes of Gallipoli through to Charlie McCallum at Isurava, wounded three times, with Bren gun in one hand and Tommy gun in the other, holding off scores of Japanese while his mates escaped, has inspired countless other

Diggers to follow their noble leads. From the start, once the Digger left his home shores he committed himself to his quest, as Charles Bean noted of the First AIF:

'The fond dream of the return home was silently surrendered by many without a word, or a sign in their letters. The ambitions of civil life had been given up; men's keenness now was for the AIF – for their regiment, battalion, company – and for the credit of Australia.'

The Digger comes in all shapes and sizes and from all backgrounds and walks of life. He (and now she) has something of the Australian ethos of the volunteer for, historically, most Diggers have not been regular Army soldiers but volunteers for a specific cause. And they have returned without regret to their former civilian lives after their conflicts ended. Even our National Servicemen volunteered for service in Vietnam.

Originally, many Diggers came off the land: practical, self-reliant men accustomed to hardship; skilled horsemen; good shots; men good with their hands. But even when, in later years, the vast majority of the Diggers came from the cities, there seemed to be little loss in effectiveness as a force. Wally Thompson, a former Regimental Sergeant Major of the Australian Army (a post established to give Diggers a direct conduit to the Chief of the Army), has studied the makeup of the Digger and the way it's changed:

'In the First World War when Bluey rode up from the bush, he could shoot, ride, swear, a great all-rounder. But Bluey was maybe not the bloke I wanted in my section or company or the battalion because he would tend to be an individual. Individuals can be very dangerous. They can shine when it's necessary but they've got to learn to be part of the team. The crucial thing is the team effort. It's not me, me, me or I, I, I. Everything is in the way you train them. The spirit is there but it's all in the way you train them.'

'It goes back to the First World War. You can see the difference in the beginning at Gallipoli: it was chaos. And it was the same in the beginning in France and Belgium, particularly in

France at Fromelles. It was up the guts and it was sheer bravery but ridiculous bravery. A great example was at The Nek in Gallipoli. They knew they were going to die for nothing but they went ahead because they wouldn't let their mates down.

'But it was bad leadership from the top. Later on in the battles in France, they thought there's got to be a better way and they started "fire and movement". The Germans used it, and the French, and we did. So we didn't just go straight in, we'd put a gun down and fire and move. In other words we were learning to work as a team. And things like The Nek, where there was no teamwork, could have been Gettysburg or Waterloo.

'But I also contradict myself here too because you still need those Blueys in the platoon – just not in that style of up-the-guts. You need him when the chips are down, things are crook, morale's low, you've taken a few casualties, a few killed, it's not a good day. That's when the Digger humour comes into it. Not so much a bloke doing something himself but an act, like jumping up into a shell hole and saying "Bugger it, I'm gonna have a wash". It's the joke, the laughter, it gets people going. I think it's the ethos of Australia, our character.'

This larrikin approach and the humour that travels with Australians wherever they go have become ingrained in the Digger. Whatever the occasion, no matter how desperate, no matter how solemn, the Digger will find the humour in it, as Peter Cosgrove recalls:

'I can remember when I was the Director of Infantry and I was watching a whole group of infantry soldiers in the Duke of Gloucester Cup Section Competition go through some very arduous military tests.

'They'd been hard at it for days, all trying in their Section groups to outdo each other, just punishing themselves to be the best. It was late on the last day of the competition and I'd brought a whole lot of venerable old retired officers by Land Rover up this extraordinarily steep bush track. You'd get sunburn on the roof of your mouth walking up it.

'The Land Rover was groaning its way up in low gear past

these sweating soldiers who were climbing this hill on the way. We popped out from the vehicle up the top, fresh as daisies, and we're watching these kids struggle the last few metres across the finish line.

'And there's some kid with a machine gun and a very heavy load plodding up this hill. He looked up, he saw me and he suddenly assumed this very worried expression. He looked at me and said: "Oh, hello Sir. How are you?" I said: "I'm alright soldier." And he said: "You're not tired or anything are you Sir, because this hill's very steep?" That, to me, was typical – and wonderful – the irreverence and the fact that, at the end of the test, this bloke still had a spark of humour left in him.'

The irreverence is interwoven into the traditional Digger's disdain for traditional military 'spit and polish'. From their earliest days, this attitude has been mistaken for a lack of discipline. But, clearly, when it mattered, the Digger matched any army for discipline under fire. Wally Thompson:

'People say Australian soldiers are not well disciplined and that's a myth, especially in the present day. They may be a little bit raucous and play up a little bit on leave but that's spirit and you want that spirit. But in the field, on operations, they are moulded together as one.

'It really is quite incredible. I had three tours in Vietnam and I saw it. Larrikinism is a bit of spirit. In many ways our country is drifting away from that. We're getting a bit more selfish in our ways and I think the military pulls people back into reality and says mate you're not as good as you think you are – it's a great leveller.

'It doesn't matter how good you think you are, it's how good the group thinks you are that counts. It's like somebody who thinks he's a bit of a goer; there's always someone who can do him. It's that spirit and the caring for each other.'

Peter Cosgrove believes one of the cornerstones of the good Digger is his reliability. His word must be his bond:

'If the fellow says I won't let you down, I'll be there or I'll guard this or I'll take care of you, then that's written in stone. And it's

this bond of trust that is the core of mateship. Mateship can't exist without trust and reliability and we elevate mateship but it must be built on the fundamental obligation felt by the individual to keep his or her word.'

Like all successful teams, the Australian Army fosters a healthy level of competition within its ranks. As former Vietnam vet, retired Major, Dennis Ayoub observes, competition often puts things into perspective:

'An engineer commander once told me: "In every group of men, each one of those men can do one thing, at least, better than you can." I always bore that in mind. There was always one who could run further and faster than anyone else, one who could do more chin-ups, another who was the best plant operator, the best grader operator. There was always recognition for the best. The bloke who was best at it would always get that job.'

'It's very important that soldiers are felt to be important. Diggers know they are part of a team and each one knows he's a pivotal person in that group because of his excellence at something or the team's representative at one specific area. A natural hierarchy will develop and they'll work within the best skill divisions.'

'As an officer you must know and understand that and you must foster it and work within that teamwork. But soldiers who are very good at things can become hard to manage, like very bright kids at school. So you must work to stop them being bored and keep them occupied. Often a good way to do that was to pass on their skills and information to new members of the team or other units; cross pollination.'

Peter Cosgrove sees the value of the competitive spirit in the Digger:

'Our infantry soldiers are an extraordinary bunch of people and they rate themselves really highly. They don't often leave you wondering about how good they are and how they compare with any other soldiers in the army.'

'That can be galling to equally feisty blokes who drive tractors or huge trucks or who service artillery pieces or who have changed

the tracks on an armoured fighting vehicle. These are all blokes who do a tough job well so there's a little bit of that sort of internal professional rivalry, which is fine. It's a bit like the Australian use of the term "Bastard". With just a couple of nuances of difference in the way you use it you can be greeting your oldest friend, or putting an eternally damning curse on somebody.'

'But you know, I think Australian soldiers have got a healthy respect for each other, helped along a bit by the fact that whenever you see an infantry organisation you don't have to look very far to see the other parts of the army that support operations in there close by.'

When the Anzacs fought alongside the British, at Gallipoli and later in France, they first had to prove themselves as worthy soldiers. Having done that, they found the British officers still regarded them with disdain because of what they perceived as the 'unmilitary' relationships between the Australian officers and their Diggers. In his book *Digger*, John Laffin wrote of the British officers:

'They were appalled to find that, in action, private soldiers often called officers by their Christian names.'

'A Queensland captain was sharply rebuked by an English colonel for telling his men details of a projected attack. The colonel said testily that it was not done for officers to discuss battle details with private soldiers. The captain, whose name is unknown, said: "I don't regard them as private soldiers, sir, they are my mates. Naturally I want them to know why I'm asking them to risk their lives".'

Much of this difference in approach can be attributed to the old British military class structure, where the upper class dominated the top ranks and the lower levels came from the middle and lower classes. From the start, by necessity, the Australian Army had a strong egalitarian attitude. The lack of an established class structure meant that most commissions were earned on merit. The heavy casualties suffered by our AIF in World War I, with the consequent rapid promotions across the board, saw tested leaders rise through the ranks.

Their experiences as private soldiers gave them an appreciation of the Diggers' problems, and the fact that the officers earned their promotions by performance meant they generally earned the respect of their troops. This system has persisted to the present day. As Wally Thompson points out, the Digger is still a key element in the Australian Army:

'Wars may be fought with weapons but they're won by men with courage and fighting spirit to close with the enemy. Good leadership, good planning, good equipment and weapons and good training are all ingredients. But, in the end, it's the soldiers and how they execute the plans and orders, using their field skills and weapons with confidence, who will win the firefight or the battle – soldiers with pride in themselves and the steadfast knowledge that their mates are trained to the task and will not fail them in the test of battle.'

'When you go and look at a war memorial, you'll see private, private, private, corporal, private, sergeant, private, corporal, private, lieutenant, private, private. The soldiers do the fighting. They do the bleeding and they do the dying. And we must never forget that.'

History has shown that the Digger will perform super-human feats if he has faith in his mates. He's generally convinced he won't be the one to be killed, as an old Digger told Dennis Ayoub:

'He said: "I wasn't concerned about the one that had my name on it. I was worried about the one that had "To Whom it May Concern" on the fucking thing!" Most of us believed that if someone was aiming at you, you'd probably be killed outright, shot in the head or the heart. The one to worry about is the one which you were going to cop out of the blue, a ricochet, or over-spray or something like that!'

And the Digger can cope as long as he knows his mates will look after him if something does happen. Wally Thompson:

'We have a thing in our army: we don't leave our wounded. And that's terribly important. It all comes down to the lowest denominator – mates. It's as an extended family: don't pick on

my brother – I can have a fight with my brother but I'll fight with him against anyone else.'

The core strength of the Australian Army lies in the quality of its sub-units – the section, the squadron, the platoon, the battery and the company – and the quality of the men who command these units. As we've seen on many occasions, in many conflicts, it doesn't matter how good a soldier's equipment is if he doesn't have the necessary fighting spirit. Conversely, as Vietnam showed, a poorly armed force with an unquenchable desire to win can upset even the most powerful army. To Wally Thompson it makes sense to view the army as a human body:

'The officers are the head, the brain, the orders and the policies; the backbone is the sergeant, as it's always been; the arms and legs are the junior NCOs which make the thing move; the actual body is made up of the soldiers. Of course, the Company Sergeant Major is the heart because he is the link between the brain and the body.'

Of course, the NCOs have always held the view that the officers command the army . . . but the NCOs run it! The interplay between, on the one hand, the NCOs and their officers and, on the other, the NCOs and their troops is crucial. Some relationships have proven themselves over time, as Vietnam vet, retired Colonel, Mike McDermott points out:

'There is a master-apprentice relationship between the sergeant and the officer in the Australian Army. The sergeants take on the job of keeping you alive and making sure that you don't do anything stupid.'

'Early in my time in Vietnam, I ran along the beach chasing some VC with a machine gun and starting firing at them and my sergeant grabbed me and said: "Sir, for Christ's sake, don't do that again! I've lost a few platoon commanders and I don't want to lose any more!" His name was Brian London and he got a DCM, the next one down to the VC.'

'The master-apprentice relationship is part of the system. Generally the sergeant is an older bloke than the officer. I was 21 and Brian was about 33 and he'd been to Vietnam before and he'd done a lot before I got there. They don't countermand you. Rather, it's: "Sir, that's an interesting plan. Not the silliest I've seen from you. Some of us might survive that plan" – non-confrontational language which just guides you.'

The Army converts most soldiers into short-term goal seekers. It's the nature of much of the work and it's the best way to minimise breakdowns in communication and to avoid confusion in the field. Dennis Ayoub knows how it works. He rose from the ranks to retire a major:

'The Digger is normally a very, very manageable person. But he's also an intelligent and wily dude. He's a rat-cunning sort of a bloke who doesn't thrive on bullshit for a start.

'He's fairly pragmatic. He'll accept his lot but if he can see another way of doing things he's not averse to saying: "Yeah that's very, very good but why don't we just walk over here and, like the young bull, old bull thing, just take the whole lot." They are also not averse to saying that something's wrong. In fact I think almost all Australian soldiers are potential union delegates. One thing you often hear is "Ayorta", as in: "Ayorta do it this way, it's much quicker".'

'If you give a Digger a logical and substantial reason for doing something, he'll do it for you. If you bullshit to him, you'll never get him to do anything for you.'

Over a lifetime's experience, Wally Thompson has developed some basic rules:

'Keep orders to a minimum. Pass the information through the chain of command. Let the soldiers see the importance of their closest commander, their leader, the section commander.'

'Mutual respect must be upheld to all soldiers at all times by all ranks, including officers and NCOs. The company must have cohesion to be an effective fighting unit. The respect must be seen between the officers and the NCOs and between the soldiers themselves.'

'Treat NCOs and soldiers as you would like to be treated yourself, firmly but fairly. There's no room for standover merchants or bullyboys in the NCO ranks.'

'You must show strength of character and toughness when and if required. Never let a fault or a sloppy activity become norm. Set high standards and enforce them. The Diggers must see you have both physical and moral courage.'

There is a sense of instinctive leadership in the Digger: a strange dichotomy in which many Diggers are content to allow someone they respect to lead them while, at the same time, maintaining a sort of 'watching brief' on them. Peter Cosgrove believes this attitude contributes to a higher standard of leadership by keeping those in command on their toes:

'Our Diggers have got this sort of restless ingenuity. And a sense of irreverence, too, because they're not sitting back there thinking Senior Lance Corporal is going to give me an order and that will be good. It's more along the lines of when's the dopey so-and-so Lance Corporal going to get here and figure out what we figured out ten minutes ago: that it's raining or it's going to rain, or that if we don't move soon we won't get a feed.'

'So it's this sort of cheerful pressure on those who are appointed as leaders, which actually makes them much better [leaders]. You don't prance around with a sort of conferred and acquiescently-agreed mantle of authority as a leader in the army. You work all the time to establish and reaffirm your credibility and it can last just a few seconds: if you come out with something dumb; if you miss the obvious point; if you're cranky for no reason; or if you're dismissive of this sense of initiative. And you've also got to play within the boundaries because with that comes a tinge of irreverence which is the Diggers, to some extent, always mildly pushing the envelope.'

To Wally Thompson, an important distinction must be made between 'leaders' and 'commanders':

'They are two different things. A commander commands resources. A leader actually leads men. I believe a leader can go down to about company level, sub-unit level, where the strength

of our armies has always been – the companies, the platoons and the sections.

'The battalion [has an objective] but it's the companies, the platoons and the sections which actually achieve it.'

To the Digger, the section commander has a key role. Most commanders recognise that the section commander – the corporal or the lance corporal – is the backbone of the Army. Wally Thompson:

'Diggers idolise their section commander. On operations, you can get by with a mediocre officer and a good sergeant, or vice versa, but you cannot survive with bad section commanders. They almost never get proper recognition either.'

Dennis Ayoub recalls how his perspective about his commanding officer, Major Sandy McGregor, and his style of leadership changed once he himself became an officer:

'When I first met him I thought he was an arrogant sort of bastard. Diggers are fairly irreverent blokes. They don't like officers. They don't like officers because they're not supposed to like officers. It's not that the officer wasn't a good fellow or wasn't a capable or able bloke.'

'Sandy McGregor was a capable and able bloke, a very good commander and a very passionate bloke but a tough bastard as well. Because he was the officer, we didn't like him. Anything that he said was all bullshit and had to be treated with a certain amount of caution. He was to be treated like a politician because they're unbelievable buggers.'

'Later when I became commissioned I saw him in an entirely different light. He was trying to extract the best by his leadership and by the use of some very good qualities that he has: one was leading by example, one was being a little over-exuberant, so much so that he would allow the blokes to say "Oh for Christ's sake Sir, that's bloody ridiculous! This is the way we should be running things."

'So he'd learn by allowing them to have sufficient confidence to speak up and thus spreading the knowledge base so he was able to barnstorm an idea.'

Sandy McGregor's methods clearly worked. He was able to mould a disparate group of Diggers into a cohesive force of 'tunnel rats' in Vietnam. More than that, his leadership opened the way for many of his troops to develop their own individual leadership skills:

'We had three majors, 14 warrant officers, we had several sergeants – all out of that troop. When they came back to Australia, they really blossomed.'

They also bonded extremely closely, many remaining lifelong mates, with two of them so close that when Billy Coolburra was stricken with kidney failure a few years ago, his mate 'Snow' Wilson gave him one of his kidneys.

One of the constants in the Australian Army has been a strong emphasis on training and leadership. It has never skimmed on resources in its officer training and has been rewarded with a stream of world-class military leaders. In essence, leadership in our Army, from the level of section commander to the chief, can be reduced to four elements: planning, directing, monitoring and controlling. Former Colonel, Ted Love, explains:

'Planning is done with the help of other people, like staff officers. You need advice and how much depends on how much time you've got to make the decision.'

'Directing is not some pompous bastard standing up and saying "Here are the orders". It's making sure the staff put out orders that are sensible, clearly phrased without misunderstanding. I think it was Ulysses S. Grant who said something like: "A good order now is better than a perfect order too late".'

'Monitoring means that because every plan will change when the thing starts you've got to be able to adjust down the track. And controlling is part of adjusting. Read the battle, the intelligence, the people, the circumstances.'

'That's where the Australian army is very good at preparing, say, majors, for higher command at staff college and testing whether they can do all those four things. If you look at history

you'll see that when things go bad it's almost always one of those four things which has failed.

'Even at its most basic level of operation, if a corporal commanding a ten-man section – the lowest combat or working unit in the army – can't do those four things, then he, his men and his platoon commander have a problem. His leader must take control of him.'

Some will argue that the Digger is largely a myth. They claim that, as a fledgling nation, we needed heroes and we created them at Anzac, and we've built on that myth ever since.

It's true that mankind has always had its myths. Almost every movie can be broken down into some form of mythical journey. But myths are to some degree based on fact. And any examination of the essence of the Digger stands up to detailed scrutiny. In fact, if anything, many of the remarkable feats claimed of the Digger are actually underplayed. Countless heroic acts by Diggers have gone unnoticed and unrewarded in all wars in which they have participated. The system of decorations and awards for bravery adopted by the Australian Army has always militated against the fair recognition of the valour of the men involved. The nature of the Digger has usually meant he has been reticent about talking about his combat experiences. Yet every Digger with combat experience can give scores of examples of heroic acts that he has personally witnessed, which have gone without recognition. There is a humility and self-effacement that seems to be part of the returned Digger's makeup.

As a general rule, Diggers don't 'big-note' their own achievements. Part of the tradition has always been to shrug off achievements with a silent grin. The only time this attitude softens is when Diggers feel they must speak up so their mates receive their due, especially if the mates have died. It's also common for the survivors of major battles to tell their tales once they feel they have reached an age when they can no longer take every day's dawning for granted. They are almost

always motivated by the desire to make sure their departed mates receive due recognition – no more, but certainly no less.

While the Americans and, to a lesser extent, the British have filled the silver screen with epics based on the heroics of their soldiers, Australian films about Diggers are disproportionately thin on the ground. Many of our most decorated Diggers are little known to the Australian public – unlike their American counterparts who, through movies, are often household names.

Perhaps this will change with the groundswell of interest in the achievements of our Diggers. This is part of a nationwide movement of exploration of what it means to be an Australian. The exciting thing about this is that our youth is in the vanguard. The fact that Anzac Day at Gallipoli has recently been expanded to a two-day commemoration to accommodate the crowds travelling to the peninsula from Australia and the growth in the numbers of Australians trekking the Kokoda Track are testament to the movement and the roles played in it by our young. Substantial increases in Anzac Day march crowds; growing numbers of boys and girls marching, wearing their grandfathers' medals; a maintenance, and perhaps even an increase, in the level of respect which the community retains for the Dawn Service and Anzac Day ceremonies; and the remarkable popularity of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, are all pointers to the extent of the movement.

We are justifiably proud of the heritage our Diggers have bequeathed us. They have had an impact in world conflicts far in excess of their numbers. They have won respect from much larger armies and governments wherever they have fought, and from countries around the globe in which they have maintained the peace with justice and dignity.

Old soldiers are often criticised for being preoccupied with the past. Some have no choice, and are condemned to flashbacks and nightmares. Others only visit sporadically, on Anzac Day or at unit reunions. A few choose to spend time in the past

as an escape from the present. But most don't live in the past, they simply honour it. They will never forget the sacrifices of their mates, who gave their tomorrows for our todays. The serving Digger cannot afford the luxury of living in the past, as Wally Thompson says:

'Soldiers know about the past but they can't concentrate on the past. They must work for the future to work to make them the best and you've got to make them believe they're the best. You've got to instil pride, first as an individual in the recruit training stage, and that's quite a challenge for many. Then, when we get them into the company, we try to develop collective pride, pride in the group they're in – an esprit de corps, pride in yourself and your unit. You will not fail. You won't leave your mates behind. We're a team. We're brothers in arms.'

'I'm sure the blokes in the Second World War tried to be as brave as the blokes in the First War. We used to talk about the battles in Korea, at Kapyong and Maryang San, and in Vietnam at Long Tan and Coral.'

'But you don't dwell on it because that's the past and because a unit did something in the past doesn't mean they're going to do it in the future. It all depends on them: their pride in themselves; then in their sub unit; and then in their unit.'

In many ways the Digger is a study in contradictions: he doesn't crave war yet he will fight with unequalled ferocity; he hates spit and polish but will hold his discipline under the most trying conditions; he is tough yet compassionate; he hates his enemy until he surrenders, then he is generous in victory; he despises histrionics but will cry unashamedly at the loss of a mate; he believes he's invincible but he's not afraid of death; he will refuse promotion but unhesitatingly take command in a crisis; he will poke fun at his leaders but defend them with his life; he represents an arm of the nation's authority, yet he hates authority.