



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

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“Evaluate the usefulness of diary entries, letters and photographs for providing evidence about the contrasting experiences and perspectives of Australians who served in either the First World War or the Second World War.”

Between 1939 and 1945, almost a million Australians served across Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific. In their wake, they left diaries, letters, and photographs that preserved the human nature of war (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2021). Shaped by censorship, morale, and societal expectations of gender and duty, these private records provide emotional and moral truths that official histories often overlook. They are not neutral descriptions of battle, but reflections of what hardship meant to Australians. As historian Peter Stanley notes, “Australians have to accept that not everything in their military history is praiseworthy, heroic, or worthy. Some things happened, whether we like them or not” (Stanley, 2014). Evaluating the usefulness of these sources reveals both insight and limitations. Their value lies less in factual precision than in showing how Australians represented themselves in war. As Joy Damousi argues, war created new ways for Australians to express emotion publicly through silence and restraint (Damousi, 2001). These records became artefacts of how national identity and intimacy intertwined.

The most immediate emotional evidence surfaced from servicepeople confronting danger daily. Written during the Siege of Tobruk in 1941, Lance Corporal P.T. Saunders' diary recounts a night when “nine wounded came in and some were serious... one had a bullet through the head” (Appendix A). As a member of the 2/8th Field Ambulance, Saunders served in a 241-day siege marked by heat, disease, and relentless German artillery. His tone, describing “booby traps” and “mortar wounds,” reflects a determination to impose order upon chaos (Appendix A). The diary's usefulness lies in its immediacy: capturing both physical danger and emotional discipline. Yet Saunders rarely admits fear, instead noting that morale was “high” (Appendix A). This restraint mirrors what historian Bill Gammage identified as a trademark of Australians writing about war - their “understated courage” and refusal to dwell on terror as “they wrote to their families of the miseries they endured,” (Gammage, 2019). Saunders' voice, therefore, embodies a moral code of stoic service rather than unfiltered truth. Though limited in factual evidence, his diary reveals the cultural language of courage. It demonstrates how emotional endurance became a moral proof of character - a pattern repeated across Australian wartime writings.

A parallel perspective emerges in the photograph of Australian Army Nursing Service Sisters Jean Greer and Betty Jeffrey, taken in 1945 after more than three years as prisoners of war (Appendix B). Their emaciated faces and composed expressions convey what the Department of Veterans' Affairs (2020) noted as “courage, resilience, and sacrifice.” Like Saunders' diary, the image communicated emotional endurance through restraint. Within its visual testimony of female resilience, clear proof of professionalism and dignity lies amid captivity. Yet photographs remain silent; they capture presence but not inner thought. The nurses' calm expressions contrast with the conditions they endured in captivity, portraying how professionalism masked suffering. This tension between appearance and reality makes the photograph invaluable to historians studying how women represented strength in the face of adversity. These sources reveal a moral vocabulary: courage through duty, fear beneath endurance. They offer historians insight into the emotional and ethical fabric of Australia's wartime identity. They also expose how men and women alike

used self-control as a language of honour, constructing an image of Australia built on quiet endurance rather than overt heroism.

Letters from the front lines illuminate how censorship and social expectations shaped emotional expression. Lance Corporal Lindsay Negus' letter from Crete describes exhaustion - "knocked over by a lorry... no sleep for a week" - yet he turns quickly to gratitude, "I shall never go to sleep before thanking God for bringing us out" (Appendix C). Similarly, Flying Officer Colin Flockhart, in his farewell address to family, wrote that he has been "completely happy" and that he believes "our actions are justified in the eyes of God" (Appendix D). Such optimism reflects the moral culture of service, reinforced by censorship from September 1939 that deleted references to anything that may interfere with the war (Vickery, 2003). Consequently, letters become unreliable as factual accounts but deeply useful as evidence of wartime self-presentation. Soldiers wrote to comfort families, not to confess despair. This selective honesty shows how emotional censorship mirrored physical censorship - revealing not only what soldiers endured, but what they should feel.

The propaganda posters *It Can Happen, It Does Happen* (Appendix E) and *Those Who Talk Don't Know* (Appendix F) reinforced this culture visually. Their bold slogans warned civilians against careless speech but also modelled emotional discipline: silence, vigilance, and loyalty. The stylised artwork created an atmosphere of constant alertness. These posters emotionally trained Australians to link silence with patriotism. The posters' usefulness lies in contextualising letters and diaries within a system that rewarded optimism and censored vulnerability. When compared with post-war testimonies on the Anzac Portal, prisoners later admitted they "worried about not knowing when or if they would be set free," clarifying the limits of wartime correspondence (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2024). Once censorship was lifted, the suppressed fear and trauma surfaced. This contrast between wartime optimism and post-war honesty shows how censorship produced a selective national memory. Letters thus reveal not only the reality of the war, but the creation of a moral myth - a myth where duty and reassurance became patriotic obligations.

The diversity of wartime experience appears vividly in sources depicting captivity. The photograph of Australian prisoners on the Burma-Thailand Railway, secretly taken by Private George Aspinall in 1943, shows three skeletal men labelled "fit" by their Japanese captors (Appendix G). Around 9,500 Australian prisoners of war worked on the railway, and 2,815 died during its construction (Australian War Memorial, 2023). The image offers undeniable evidence of suffering, yet individuality is erased - names and voices are lost. Its usefulness lies in its stark testimony to endurance and the moral cost of war. This visual record also reminds historians of the power of evidence taken under risk. Aspinall's secret photography, punishable by death, transforms the image into a quiet act of resistance - a refusal to let suffering remain invisible.

This tension between survival and silence is mirrored in the experiences of Vivian Bullwinkel, the sole survivor of the 1942 Bangka Island massacre, exemplifying the perseverance of women in war (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2013). After surviving attempted execution and rape, Bullwinkel missed death in the surf and spent more than three

years as a prisoner of war before testifying at war-crimes trials (Department of Veterans' Affairs 2013, van Teeseling 2022). Similarly, historian Christina Twomey noted "'women being taken prisoner...' was a very problematic thing for [Australians] to understand in terms of the gendered nature of war" (Spencer, 2022). Bullwinkel's response to trauma reflects the moral economy of silence found in Saunders' diary, revealing how women navigated trauma within a male-dominated narrative of stoicism. Her composure became a deliberate form of moral strength - a refusal to let trauma define her identity.

As Sarah Fulford remarks, "the female stories are quite often the marginalised other in the context of war," identifying them as neglected in Australia's national story of the Second World War (Chavez, 2017). This marginalisation, echoed by Professor Melanie Oppenheimer's observation that "the Anzac tradition with women's contributions [was] marginalised as 'watching and waiting' ... rather than active participants," highlights the selective remembrance embedded in national history (Oppenheimer, 2018). Together, these sources and interpretations demonstrate that diaries, letters, and photographs are not merely records of endurance, but evidence of exclusion, revealing whose courage Australia chooses to remember. They remind historians that usefulness remains not only in what is said, but in what remains unspoken. In acknowledging these silences, we gain a fuller understanding of how memory, gender, and endurance shaped Australia's moral identity.

By juxtaposing men's and women's accounts, the usefulness of personal sources is elucidated. Soldiers' writings illuminate endurance through combat; nurses' testimonies and photographs capture compassion through care. Each is partial, yet together they reconstruct a richer moral landscape. The missing voices, the Indigenous soldiers, civilians, and the dead, mark the limits of what evidence can recover, encouraging historians to read silence as meaning. In a sense, the gaps in the record are as telling as the words and images themselves, revealing the boundaries of what wartime Australia allowed to be spoken. Diaries, letters, and photographs from the Second World War are fragments of human experience - subjective, selective, and emotionally charged. They do not provide a complete account of events, yet they reveal how Australians made a moral sense of war. In the present day, Australians remember their wars not so much for what they were, but for what they mean to us now. "Lest we forget," the service and sacrifice of the men and women of Australia are remembered (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2025). The usefulness of these sources lies precisely in that meaning: they show how endurance, compassion, and faith became national virtues shaped by censorship and silence. They also demonstrate how memories constructed as private testimonies became public symbols in museums and ANZAC Commemorations.

Historians such as Stanley and Damousi demonstrate that understanding war requires reading emotion as evidence. The personal voices of Saunders, Negus, Flockhart, Greer, Jeffrey, and Bullwinkel reveal the intertwined moral and emotional worlds of Australians who served. Their words and images remind us that wartime history is not just about battles, but about how ordinary people sought dignity and understanding amid chaos. The fragments they left behind remain profoundly useful - not for their completeness, but for their humanity.

APPENDIX

Appendix A:

Extract from the diary of Lance Corporal P. T. Saunders, 2/8th Field Ambulance, 1 July 1941, Tobruk, North Africa. (Brian Saunders, *Happy in the Service: The personal WWI and WWII diaries of P. T. Saunders*, Green Hill Publishing, Adelaide, 2019)

We are having lovely clear nights with lots of stars and moonlight. I was up all night as nine wounded came in and some were serious...one had a bullet through the head, another in the left chest, then a back wound, several with legs and arm injuries, and there were trench mortar wounds again. They say that Fritz is deadly with them too, over a two to three thousand yard range.

Fritz are out laying many booby traps and mines. One type of booby trap is a mine about twelve pounds in weight, round with spikes on it to which are attached the detonators. There are three hundred and twenty-five pellets in each mine and as soon as one touches it slightly it sets off some TNT which makes the booby trap which is just under the ground, spring three feet into the air and then it bursts, and is pretty effective. They lay these out all over the place about twelve feet apart and in between set a land mine, like a frying pan, which has trip wires attached to it and when walking you trip over the wire and you set her off, and up she goes. We hear they had been placing them under dead bodies and when our chaps go out to bury the dead at night and lift them up, then up goes the mine. They have even gone to the trouble of stacking them so that if you de-activate the one on top and lift it there is one underneath that goes up.

Captain McArthur of Kadina came in wounded this morning and told me all this. He said the men, although using much bad language over the Hun, the country, the conditions etc, are nevertheless of high morale and waiting to have a go at the enemy.

The night patrols are limited to four men and they go out crawling on their tummies for hundreds and maybe thousands of yards or more, feeling the ground for these spikes and trip wires and de-activating them as they go. Two abreast with one behind them in case they miss anything, and then one with a tape that shows them the safe path back to their lines. They try to find out the strength of the enemy and other information before they go back, all the time expecting the wrath of the enemy to fall on them. They do it night after night and then if not on this they are at work digging in at night, and all day long they lay quiet in holes eighteen inches deep and wide. They lay in the broiling sun and multitudinous flies not daring to move in case the enemy snipers get them, and they are great shots too.

The country here is so full of waddies (gullies) it is possible to get Ambulances up quite close to the front line at night, and so there is no long carrying of wounded by stretcher. The longest is about a quarter of a mile, but wounded are nearly always taken out at night, some even having to lay out all day in the open until night falls. The Regimental Aid Post I am told is not up so close to the front line, but Battalion bearers carry the wounded back to it and then they are picked up by Ambulance behind some hill.

Desert sores are plentiful now and they are like our Barcoo Rot back home, hard to heal up as it keeps breaking out in fresh places and takes weeks in some cases.

A warm day, Alby, Sergeant Hood, myself and Norman Nesbit went down to 'A' Company at the beach and are staying down here for two days. We had just had dinner and were back on the beach when a terrific din was heard...forty to fifty German planes were over bombing Tobruk. There was Anti-Aircraft fire everywhere and then they flew back over us out to sea just skimming the water and firing their machine guns at us in the caves as they went...the bullets were chipping pieces out of the rocks near us. None were brought down as far as I know.

We are sleeping down on the rocks and in the caves on the shore. Alby and I scrounged a big net and are sleeping on it.

There have been one or two more planes over. We went to bed early.

Australian War Memorial (1941), <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2025]

Appendix B:

Australian Army Nursing Service Sisters, Jean Keer Greer of Petersham, NSW (left), and Sister Betty Jeffrey of East Malvern, Vic, in hospital in Malaya in 1945 after spending three and a half years as prisoners of war of the Japanese in the Dutch East Indies. (AWM 305369)



Australian War Memorial (1945), <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 14 Oct. 2025]

Appendix C:

Extract from Lance Corporal Lindsay Negus's letter to his mother describing his experiences in escaping capture by the German Army and being evacuated from the island of Crete in May 1940. (AWM 3DRL/4052)

It took us from the 27th to the night of the 30th May to reach our embarkation point. I was knocked over by a lorry, fell down a hill-side twice, and had no sleep for a week, frightened to go to sleep, legs and hands cut and full of thorns, but we all kept going – anything to beat our ruthless enemy. I was on board HMAS Perth and slept for a couple of hours after a cup of hot cocoa and biscuits. You have no idea of what it feels like to be safe, just going from hell to heaven. I shall never go to sleep before thanking God for bringing us out. Our arrival at port (Alexandria, Egypt) was greeted by the Red Cross with steaming hot tea and cocoa, biscuits, fruit and chocolates... All I have at present is one pair of shorts and a shirt plus my razor and pay-book. Everything that you gave me is gone, my souvenirs and things I bought to send home to you all, but never mind I still have my life thanks to our lads who fought rear-guards to keep the Hun back while most of us escaped... I know what it is like to be hungry and thirsty.

Australian War Memorial (1940), <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2025]

Appendix D:

Extracts from letter written by Flying Officer Colin Flockhart to his family, 1 December 1944. Flockhart was killed on 8 January 1945 when his Lancaster bomber was shot down on a bombing raid over Germany. (AWM 2020.22.11)

England, Dec 1. 1944

To my loved ones

Being in rather a sentimental mood tonight I have decided to do something I have meant to do for a long time – to record some of my impressions so that, if, by some chance, I should not finish my tour you will know just how I feel about things

...

First of all let me say that I have enjoyed my Air Force service as I have enjoyed no other years of my life and I have been completely happy the whole time. I have travelled, made friendships and shared experiences which will stand me in good stead all my life ...

This war was inevitable and I could never have been content unless I did my share, so never regret having given me your consent to enlist. I have been very proud to wear my uniform...

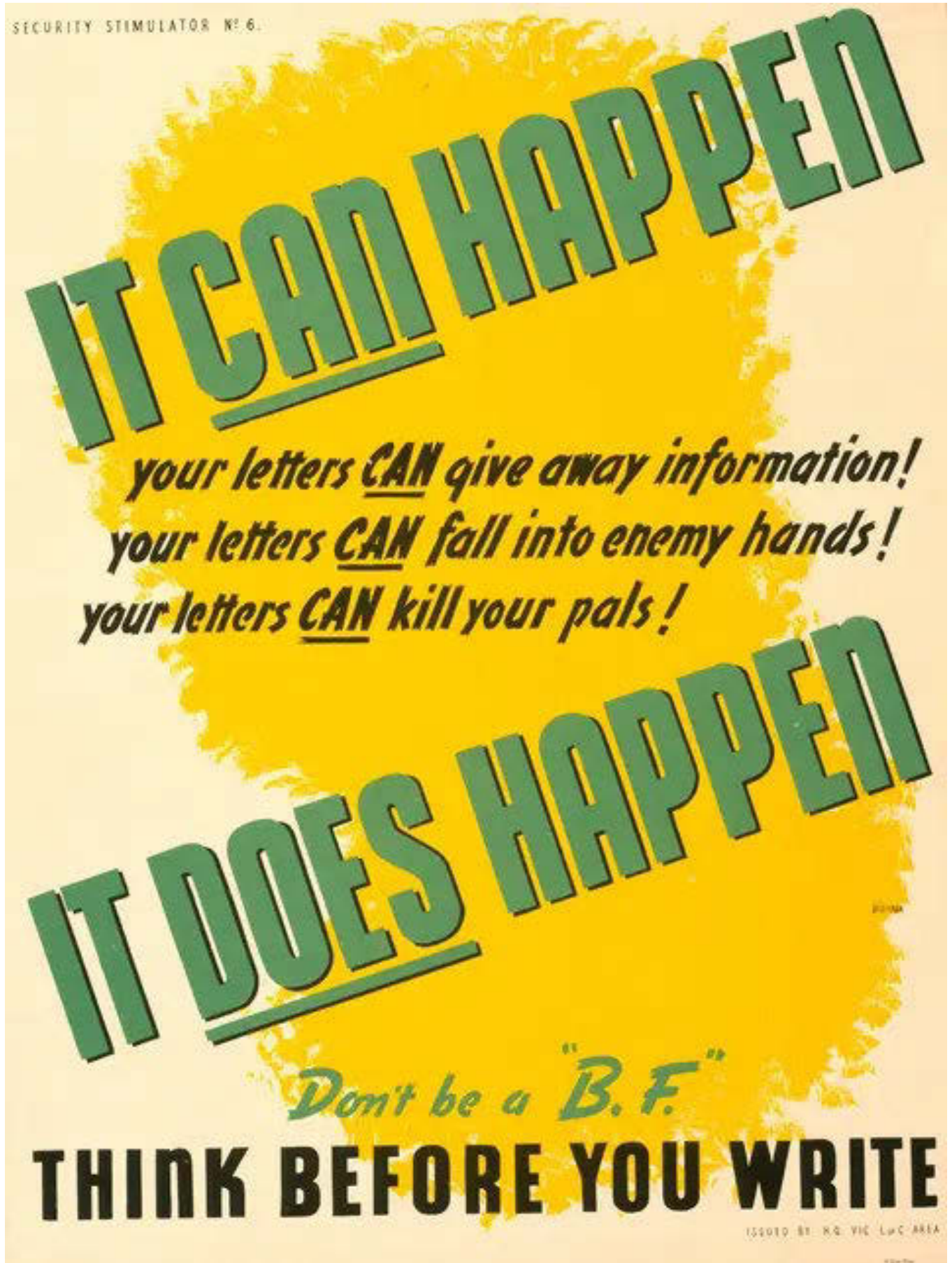
I believe in the cause for which we are fighting and I am equally sure that our actions are justified in the eyes of God. My faith in God never wavers and, after asking for His blessing, I go about my job in the manner you would have me do, for I feel sure that He is watching over and protecting me.

I want you to know therefore that if I do die I shall not be afraid because my heart is at ease.

Please don't think I'm pessimistic but I do realise what the odds are and I have seen too many of my friends pass on without leaving any words of hope or encouragement behind.

Appendix E:

R. Malcolm Warner (1943), "It Can Happen, It Does Happen".



Warner (1943) <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C98049> [Accessed 16 Oct. 2025]

Appendix F:

R. Malcolm Warner (1943) "Those Who Talk Don't Know".



Appendix G:

Three Australian prisoners of war classified as 'fit' workers by their Japanese captors on the Burma-Thailand Railway. The photo was taken secretly by Private George Aspinall while he was a prisoner of war in 1943. (AWM PO2569.192)



Australian War Memorial (1943), <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026> [Accessed 15 Oct. 2025]

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