



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2026 Winner | Western Australia

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WILLETTON SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

World War II is known as the bloodiest conflict in history, lasting from 1939 to 1945¹, and extending its death and destruction across nearly every continent of the world. Though historians argue there being several causes of the outbreak of war, the trigger has been identified as Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939². This invasion caused the Allies (and dominions) of Britain and France to declare war on Germany, who was later supported by Italy and Japan. The major theatres of war in World War II included the European, Mediterranean, Pacific and African theatres³. Australia was more involved in the Pacific theatre, specifically after Singapore, which was viewed as impenetrable, fell to the Japanese⁴. The Fall of Singapore sparked awareness in Australian politicians of Australia now being significantly vulnerable if war were to erupt on their homeland. This realisation also drove the increase in volunteer soldiers and resulted in conscription⁵. Diary entries, letters and photographs of serving Australians display the evolving and contrasting perspectives and experiences of soldiers as the war progressed⁶. In general, photographs and letters are less useful when compared to diary entries, in terms of reliability and purposeful omission or inclusion, when displaying Australian veterans' contrasting perspectives and experiences in relation to patriotism, the thrill of war and the veteran's contrasting reasons for persistence and involvement in World War II⁷.

The letter written by Flying officer Colin Flockhart to his family (1 December 1944, Source G)⁸ and Australian Ex-Soldier Jack O'Donnell's diary (Appendix A) are useful to a moderate and high extent respectively, in providing evidence on the contrasting perspectives and experiences on patriotism, and a veteran's personal purpose in the war. In the letter which Colin Flockhart writes to his family, he states that the '*war was inevitable*' and admits of not being content with himself unless '*I [he] did my [his] share*'. This displays Flockhart's rather nationalistic perspective on war, claiming to be dissatisfied unless he fulfilled his duty and contributed as a loyal Australian, as was the pressuring perspective of the Australian government

1. Hughes T, Royde-Smith J 2025, *World War II*. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II> [17 June 2025]
2. Hughes T, Royde-Smith J 2025, *World War II*. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II> [17 June 2025]
3. Info Kada, 2025, *Major Theatres of World War 2*. Available from <https://infokada.in/world-war-2/major-theatres-of-world-war-2/> [19 June 2025]
4. Conti L, Easton M, Wilson J, Carrodus G, Delany T, Wilson A 2016, 'The course of the war in Asia and the Pacific', *Oxford big ideas humanities and social sciences 10: Western Australian Curriculum*, pp. 280. Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.
5. Conti L, Easton M, Wilson J, Carrodus G, Delany T, Wilson A 2016, 'Australian experiences of the war abroad', *Oxford big ideas humanities and social sciences 10: Western Australian Curriculum*, pp. 280. Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.
6. Powell J, Veevers J 2025, *World War II in Australia in History*. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia/World-War-II> [15 June 2025]
7. Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs [unknown year of publication], *Reflections on Enlistment in World War II: In Their Own Words*. Available from: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/reflections-enlistment-ww2-their-own-words> [18 June 2025]
8. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]
9. State Library of Victoria [unknown year of publication], *The conscription debate*. Available from: <https://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwii/home-wii/conscription-debate> [18 June 2025]

at the time⁹. This is in vast contrast to prisoner-of-war Australian soldier Jack O'Donnell's diary, in which he describes his service as the '*purposeless period*' of his '*existence*' providing the perspective of war being a waste of time, which directly opposes to Flockhart's attitude towards duty and doing one's bit. Flockhart's concealment and purposeful omission of emotion is further shown through his repetitive '*I have enjoyed...*', '*I have been completely happy...*', and '*I have travelled, made friendships*' phrases in his letter, which may be aimed at reassuring his family that he is satisfied, and thus skirts around the true traumatic experience of the war. This suggests that the war was a scarring and unspeakable experience. Moreover, O'Donnell blatantly states the labour he endured as '*monotonous hours as a prisoner of war*' portraying his war experience as dull and one of duty, which is contrasted to Flockhart's assuredness and omitted tension of war. Therefore, Flockhart's letter is moderate in usefulness for evidence on war experience, as it is written for an audience, and provides the overviewed perspective of duty and patriotism. Hence, it may purposefully omit its view on the reality of war, which decreases its reliability. However, O'Donnell's diary is highly useful as the author doesn't mask his true emotions and describes the '*monotonous*' experience, as well as a boring perspective on war.

The Australian veteran's evidence on the contrasting perspectives and experiences on the thrill of war, versus the harsh reality of war, is displayed in the photograph of Troops of Australia's Infantry Battalion waiting for their train to depart Queensland (12 October 1943, Source A)¹⁰, and the photograph of three Australian prisoners of war classified as '*fit*' workers (1943, Source D)¹¹. Source A is useful to a limited extent, while Source D is useful to a moderate extent. In Source A, the men depicted in the photograph are young men who being part of the Infantry Battalion, are volunteers¹², and have large carefree smiles on their faces (looking out of the picture), suggesting this is a posed photograph. Their expressions indicate that these men have enlisted for an adventurous experience, with the expectation of them exploring the world, an idea which was shared by many young Australians¹³. This is suggested by the large bags, pillows and cowboy-style hats which they wear. However, this is contrasted to Source D, a photograph secretly taken of three starved soldiers who are depicted with jutting bones and emotionless expressions on their faces. It provides evidence of severe war experience with a cruel and harsh enemy. This is reinforced by the mocking caption stating these men as '*deemed "fit" to work in their enemy's eyes*'. Therefore, while Source A provides an adventurous perspective and heroic expectation of war, it is staged and therefore

10. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]

11. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]

12. Monument Australia [unknown publication date], *2nd/7th Australian Infantry Battalion*. Available from : <https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/ww2/display/94621-2nd---7th-australian-infantry-battalion> [17 June 2025]

13. Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs [unknown year of publication], *Reflections on Enlistment in World War II: In Their Own Words*. Available from: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/reflections-enlistment-ww2-their-own-words> [18 June 2025]

manipulated. This decreases its reliability and limits its usefulness. Source D however provides a contrasting critical and harsh perspective and experience of war. It is still likely to be posed despite being taken secretly under enemy supervision, thus being moderately useful when collecting evidence.

Serving Australians in the Second World War and their contrasting perspectives and experiences on their persistence in the war effort is depicted through evidence from the diary of Lance Corporal P. T. Saunders (1 July 1941, Source F)¹⁴ and the diary of Claude Bibb (Appendix B). In Source F, Saunders reports on the enemy's use of trip-wire bombs and states that '*Captain McArthur of Kadina [his superior commanding officer] ... told me all this*'. This conveys Saunders' proud perspective on war, as he takes care to mention his direct communication with a higher-ranking officer, thus highlighting his significance in the war. Moreover, Saunders quotes Captain McArthur of Kadina telling him that their men '*are nevertheless of high morale and waiting to have a go at the enemy*', which portrays the soldiers' determined war experience, as one likely driven out of hatred for the enemy, which governments promoted through propaganda¹⁵. However in Bibb's diary, Bibb opens his entry with '*Returning to Alexandria*', which lacks personal pronouns or emotion, conveying a reporting and concise diary entry which emphasises his dutiful perspective towards war. Even so, Bibb later marks an asterisk in his diary entry and writes '*It was the worst day I've ever experienced*', which creates a sudden and purposeful separation between his duty and the horrifying experience of war. Bibb having to mark this separation with an asterisk and saying '*We were all nervous wrecks*', displays the pressuring perspective of war and the soldier's fighting experience as one driven out of will to survive¹⁶. In general, both these extracts are highly reliable and useful as sources of evidence on war experience, being written for their eyes only and remaining uninfluenced. However, even Saunders mentions the Captain saying his men are '*using much bad language over the Hun, the country, the conditions etc*' which is brushed past briefly, but indicates that Saunders may be exaggerating the perspective of enemy-driven war effort, and potentially omitting the soldiers' possible bitterness and will to survive.

While all of these historical sources are useful to an extent, diary entries such as in O'Donnell's diary are significantly more useful as they are less likely to be manipulated, and therefore more reliable than Source G when providing evidence on the contrasting adventurous against harsh war perspective. Similarly Saunders' diary and Claude Bibb's diary are highly useful as evidence of the contrasting proud perspective against horrifying experience of war. Letters, such as Source G, are useful to a moderate extent as they are

14. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]

15. Cowley R 2025, '*Work, save, fight*': How propaganda united country in fear and resolve. Available from: <https://www.thesenior.com.au/story/8997164/propaganda-posters-a-call-to-arms-for-aussies-in-world-war-ii/> [23 June 2025]

16. Cambridge University Press 2017, *The Effects of World War II Military Service: Evidence from Australia*. Available from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/effects-of-world-war-ii-military-service-evidence-from-australia/E67FB4FC53154CE831292BDF4AF69BE3> [18 June 2025]

written to people with close ties to the individual. This could be beneficial as the individual may be more likely to confide their true experience with their close ones, however, this could alternatively serve as a limitation as individuals may conceal or omit information to prevent their loved ones from worrying. Photographs such as Source A and G are usually limited in usefulness as they can be easily manipulated and are frequently posed, making them susceptible to bias or exaggeration. This means Source A and G's contrasting adventurous perspective against cruel experience of war are less reliable as evidence. Hence, diary entries, letters and photographs can provide historians with valuable insight and evidence on the vastly contrasting experiences, thoughts, and perspectives of serving Australians during the war, however, the degree to which this is useful is debatable as the nature of the source depends on many factors. Some examples include whether the individual has purposefully omitted or included certain information for an audience, the severity of the battle in which the individual was situated, as well as their personal motives as a serving Australian. This allows us to question whether these experiences were in fact contrasting in nature, or whether they were similar but suppressed due to other motives.

10. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]
11. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]
12. Monument Australia [unknown publication date], *2nd/7th Australian Infantry Battalion*. Available from : <https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/ww2/display/94621-2nd---7th-australian-infantry-battalion> [17 June 2025]
13. Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs [unknown year of publication], *Reflections on Enlistment in World War II: In Their Own Words*. Available from: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/reflections-enlistment-ww2-their-own-words> [18 June 2025]

Unit 10 AGH

Location: Changi POW Camp

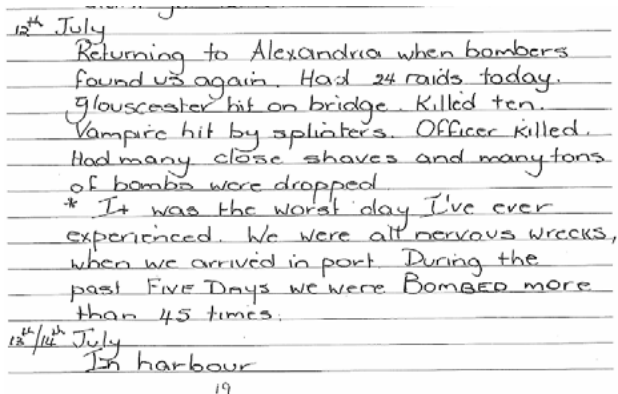
"This small book of reminiscences has been written, not with the idea of having my fast fading memories penned to paper, but just as a means of whiling away a few monotonous hours as a POW," he wrote.

"Far be it that I should want to retain many thoughts of Malaya in my memory. The past 16 months have held very few pleasant experiences for me; all of which I have recorded here and I can only hope that time alone will efface as soon as possible this brief, purposeless period of my existence."

Appendix B – Extract from the Diary of Claude Bibb

<https://vwma.org.au/collections/war-diaries>

RAN, served on HMAS Sydney. Diary Jan 1940-Feb 1941. Handwritten but clearly printed and very legible. 12th July 1940.



12th July
Returning to Alexandria when bombers found us again. Had 24 raids today. Gloucester hit on bridge. Killed ten. Vampire hit by splinters. Officer killed. Had many close shaves and many tons of bombs were dropped.
* It was the worst day I've ever experienced. We were all nervous wrecks, when we arrived in port. During the past five days we were Bombed more than 45 times.
13th/14th July
In harbour
19

14. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]

15. Cowley R 2025, 'Work, save, fight': How propaganda united country in fear and resolve. Available from: <https://www.thesenior.com.au/story/8997164/propaganda-posters-a-call-to-arms-for-aussies-in-world-war-ii/> [23 June 2025]

16. Cambridge University Press 2017, *The Effects of World War II Military Service: Evidence from Australia*. Available from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/effects-of-world-war-ii-military-service-evidence-from-australia/E67FB4FC53154CE831292BDF4AF69BE3> [18 June 2025]

4. Australian War Memorial 2025, *Second world War, 1939-45*. Available from: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/second-world-war> [23 June 2025]
5. Dr Johnson M [unknown publication date], *The civilians who joined up, 1939-45*. Available from: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/journal/j29/civils> [15 June 2025]
6. DVA (Department of Veterans' Affairs) 2024, *Secret diary of life in Changi*. Available from : <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/stories/australians-wartime/secret-diary-life-changi> [23 June 2025]
7. Hughes T, Royde-Smith J 2025, *World War II*. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/event/World-War-II> [17 June 2025]
8. Info Kada, 2025, *Major Theatres of World War 2*. Available from <https://infokada.in/world-war-2/major-theatres-of-world-war-2/> [19 June 2025]
9. National Library of Australia [2021], *War in Europe again – 'My melancholy duty'*. Available from: <https://www.library.gov.au/learn/digital-classroom/internment-world-war-2-1939-45/war-europe-again-my-melancholy-duty>
10. Powell J, Veevers J 2025, *World War II in Australia in History*. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/place/Australia/World-War-II> [15 June 2025]
11. Rosenberg 2025, *Timeline of World War II From 1939 to 1945*. Available from: <https://www.thoughtco.com/world-war-ii-timeline-1779991> [18 June 2025]
12. Virtual War Memorial Australia [unknown date of publication], *Diaries in the VWMA*. Available from: <https://vwma.org.au/collections/war-diaries> [18 June 2025]

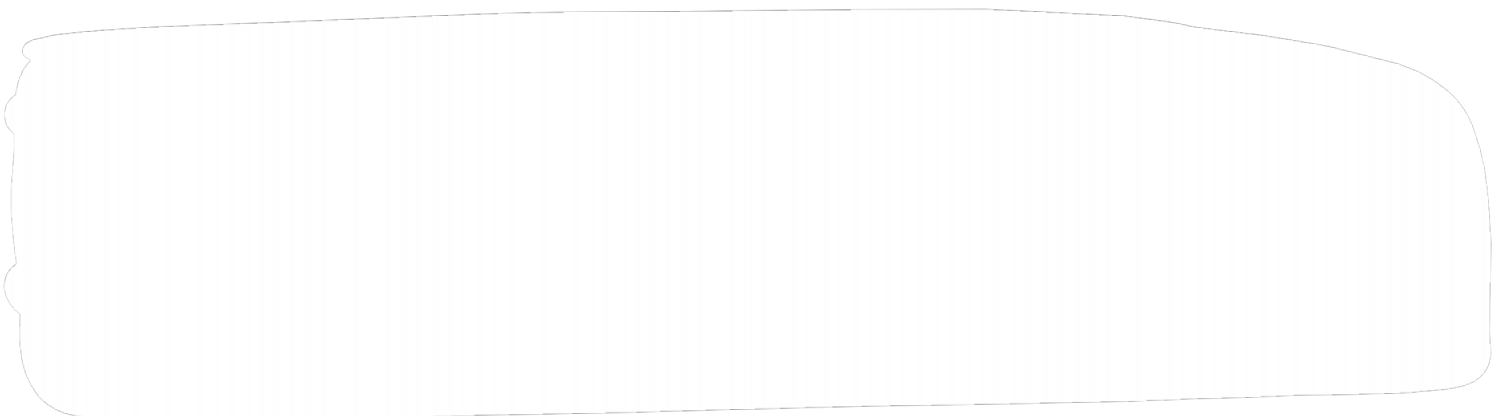
Books

13. Conti L, Easton M, Wilson J, Carrodus G, Delany T, Wilson A 2016, 'Australian experiences of the war aboard', *Oxford big ideas humanities and social sciences 10: Western Australian Curriculum*, pp. 280. Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.
14. Conti L, Easton M, Wilson J, Carrodus G, Delany T, Wilson A 2016, 'The course of the war in Asia and the Pacific', *Oxford big ideas humanities and social sciences 10: Western Australian Curriculum*, pp. 278-283. Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.
15. Conti L, Easton M, Wilson J, Carrodus G, Delany T, Wilson A 2016, 'The course of the war in Europe', *Oxford big ideas humanities and social sciences 10: Western Australian Curriculum*, pp. 272-275. Oxford University Press, South Melbourne.

Videos

10. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]
11. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]
12. Monument Australia [unknown publication date], *2nd/7th Australian Infantry Battalion*. Available from : <https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/ww2/display/94621-2nd---7th-australian-infantry-battalion> [17 June 2025]
13. Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs [unknown year of publication], *Reflections on Enlistment in World War II: In Their Own Words*. Available from: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/reflections-enlistment-ww2-their-own-words> [18 June 2025]

16. Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs 2023, *Andy Anderson – World War II veteran (RAAF)*. YouTube video, 11 December. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKzvZjS7xfc> [23 June 2025]



14. Australian War Memorial 2025, *The 2026 Simpson Prize Competition Question*. Available from: www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2026 [23 June 2026]
15. Cowley R 2025, 'Work, save, fight': How propaganda united country in fear and resolve. Available from: <https://www.thesenior.com.au/story/8997164/propaganda-posters-a-call-to-arms-for-aussies-in-world-war-ii/> [23 June 2025]
16. Cambridge University Press 2017, *The Effects of World War II Military Service: Evidence from Australia*. Available from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-economic-history/article/effects-of-world-war-ii-military-service-evidence-from-australia/E67FB4FC53154CE831292BDF4AF69BE3> [18 June 2025]