



St George's College

PERTH · WESTERN AUSTRALIA

JAMES HENRY SIMPSON

4 JUNE 1913 TO 20 FEBRUARY 1942



On 9 March 1931, twenty young men arrived at the newly-completed St George's College to take up residence. They found a quadrangle full of builder's rubble, a Chapel that was still a shell, a Porter to help them with their baggage, and the necessity to eat meals in the Junior Common Room while the Dining Hall was being completed.

One of those first residents was Jim Simpson, who had been born in Boulder and attended Boulder Primary and Boulder Central schools, before winning a scholarship at the age of 12 that took him to Eastern Goldfields High School. He had three brothers and two sisters and, without a scholarship, might not have been able to go on to Leaving year to matriculate.

Jim enrolled at the fledgling University of Western Australia in the Faculty of Arts, where he was to complete a B.A. with majors in English and math. He was deeply involved in everything that was going on in those early days at College and UWA. He was a member of the first College Club Committee and in both 1932 and 1933 he was Editor of *The Dragon*. He was elected to the Guild Council in 1933.

Jim, a country boy, nonetheless had a firm grasp of the foundation necessary to make St George's successful within the University environment. *A sustained effort to do continually what is best for the College, he editorialised in the 1932 Dragon, a sacrifice of individual desires when they clash with those of the corporate body, and an endeavour to carry on those traditions which the first members have initiated; all this should constitute an obligation...and while working for the College we should aim at furthering also the interests of The University.*

Armed with his B.A., Jim joined the staff of *The West Australian* newspaper and worked first in Perth, and then as the West's correspondent in Kalgoorlie. After returning to Perth he met his future wife, Helen Preston Bent, who had come to Perth on a selling trip for a Sydney-based hat-making company. Helen had completed a degree in Fine Arts and hoped one day to make her living as an artist.

She returned to Sydney, and Jim decided to follow her, and they were subsequently married. Jim also had wider dreams and he wrote a book that was reviewed by Norman Lindsey's brother, but it did not get to the stage of being published. To earn a living he joined the Federal Government's Department of Information, where he was able to make good use of his writing and journalistic skills.

War had broken out and Jim could have stayed with the DoI, which was a reserved occupation, but he decided he was not going to sit on the sidelines and obtained permission from his employer to join up. By this time he and his wife Helen were living in Fitzroy (Melbourne), and Jim joined up on 23 October 1941. Basic training was rushed and probably inadequate, and almost immediately the 2/21st Australian Infantry Battalion was sent to Darwin where Gull Force was being formed as one of a number of battle groups intended to defend a string of islands to halt the Japanese advance.

In December 1941, Gull Force sailed for Ambon Island in the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia). The force of 1,090 was made up of the 2/21st Battalion and C troop 18th Anti-Tank Battery, three sections of the 2/11th Field Coy, one section of the Australian Army Service Corps, the 2/12th Field Ambulance Detachment, the 23rd Special Dental Unit, and 104 Light Aid Detachment.

A few days after the fall of Rabaul, in the last days of January 1942, a Japanese task force approached Ambon. The fall of Ambon followed the same pattern as that of Rabaul - a large Japanese force, supported by aircraft carriers, landed in overwhelming strength, beginning on 31 January. After a brief fight the defenders realised the futility of further resistance and surrendered. As on New Britain, though relatively few men were lost in the island's defence, an atrocity occurred in the aftermath of defeat.

Several hundred Australians had surrendered on Laha airstrip, across Ambon Bay from the town. Soon after the battle, but continuing at intervals for nearly a fortnight, the prisoners taken at Laha were killed, most by ritual decapitation. Over 300 died between 6 February and 20 February 1942. The Laha massacre was the largest of the atrocities committed against captured Allied troops in 1942. There are several possible reasons for the massacre but it has never been fully explained.

Gull Force's survivors went into captivity at Tantui (on Ambon). In October 1942 the prisoners were divided into two groups. One group was transported to Hainan Island aboard the *Taiko Maru*, disembarking on 5 November 1942 and being imprisoned in Haicho Camp (Colonel W. J. R. Scott's Force). The other group remained on Ambon.

Their ordeal has been traced in detail by Professor Joan Beaumont's *Gull Force on Ambon*, among several other works. They were to be held on isolated islands by captors indifferent to their fate and led by an Australian officer unequal to the terrible burden of his responsibility. They suffered an ordeal and a death rate second only to the horrors of Sandakan, first on Ambon and then on Hainan. Three-quarters of the Australians captured on Ambon died before the war's end. Of the 582 who remained on Ambon 405 died. They died of overwork, malnutrition, disease and one of the most brutal regimes among camps in which bashings were routine.

Of the 263 prisoners of war sent to Hainan Island, 182 were still alive at the end of the war. They returned to Australia on HMS *Vindex* and the hospital ship *Jerusalemme*. Those who survived Ambon returned, via

Morotai, on HMAS *Glennelg*, *Junee*, *Cootamundra* and *Latrobe*, or went directly to Sydney on the hospital ship *Wanganella*.

Private Jim Simpson did not return. His death was not specifically recorded, and was nominated as 20 February 1942 as this was the last of the Ambon massacre days. By then he was presumed to have been killed. His name is engraved on the Ambon Memorial.

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“He was full of fun, very popular, cheerful and even seemingly carefree, but his charm and likeability covered a man who believed in the highest ideals of service with a clear-headed intensity. When he spoke it was with a purpose, and he had a keen and pointed sense of humour. His character was an unusual combination of fine qualities, and he will be sorely missed, but he has fulfilled the obligations of which he spoke and left us to carry on. To his wife and family we offer our deepest sympathy.”

The Dragon, 1946 (attributed to Josh Reynolds)