'What are you waiting for, Diggers?'

The ANZAC image in *Commando* comics

Abstract: For generations of Australians and New Zealanders, *Commando* comics have provided a consistent image of their ancestors at war. The image is one of men, who are inevitably tall, bronzed, shirtless, contemptuous of authority and their ability, as warriors such—in memory at least—that their mere presence on the battlefield is enough to have the Germans crying 'Donner und blitzen!', and the Italians 'Sapristi!' or the Japanese 'Aieee!' But how accurate is this depiction of Australians and New Zealanders? How well does a Scottish comic—often employing artists from Argentina and other countries—portray the ANZACS? And how did a Scottish comic come to dominate the image of Australians and New Zealanders at war for so long?

Keywords: ANZAC, Australia, comics, *Commando* comics, graphic novels, New Zealand, Second World War, war comics

PHILIP CASS and JONATHAN (JACK) FORD
Unitec, Auckland

MOST countries have created stories about their servicemen (and sometimes women) as a means of commemorating particular conflicts, of celebrating the achievements of its fighting personnel, or simply for entertainment. One of the most popular ways of doing this has been through monthly magazines and comics.

For a long time, Australia and New Zealand had no locally produced comics which depicted their country at war. This article seeks to explore how this came about and what the consequences were. We will argue that the depiction of Australian and New Zealand servicemen in *Commando* comics, the longest surviving and most successful of British war comics, was often very far from the locally-conceived image and that this was a result of the early globalisation and industrialisation of the comic production process.

While there are obvious arguments to be made about the value of film and

painting as forms of cultural expression, too little attention has been paid to the fact that the history of Australia and New Zealand's part in the century's conflicts, in comics, has been, for most of the time, in somebody else's hands.

For at least two post-war generations of Australians and New Zealanders, the depiction of our soldiers, sailors and airmen was not ours. For a couple of years, while the war raged and imports of American comics were banned, Australians had *Bluey and Curley*, the *Phantom Airman* and *Wanda the War Girl.* Elsewhere in the Dominions, the Canadians had *Canada Jack* and *Nelvana of the North* taking the fight to the Germans, but in Canada, as in Australia, once American comics were imported again the local product began to disappear (Gray, 2017).

There has been much recent research into the role of war comics in society, including work by Laurie (2014), Scott (2011), Clarkson (2008) and Gibson (2008) and Chapman (2011, 2013, 2016). Work on Australian comics and society by Foster (1998, 1999) and masculinities by Laurie (1999) has been complemented by later work by Chapman (2011) and Chapman and Ellen (2012).

War comics tell us a great deal about our expectations of behaviour in times of crisis, what Clarkson (2008) calls 'constructions of ideal masculinity' and, in specific and general terms, they may provide enough information through entertainment to make people want to find out, to use von Ranke's words, how things essentially were.

War comics tell us much about how we see our past, how we idealise or imagine our soldiers behaving, how we conceive of notions such as bravery and resolution, how we moved from seeing every enemy combatant as evil, until the day came when war comics began to admit that in the Second World War, yes, there had been good Germans and good Italians and, shockingly to some readers, even good Japanese. War comics also give us some idea of what the past looked like and—with sometimes less accuracy—how people talked; how they thought, how they reacted; they tell us what they wore and what their equipment was like.

For children who wanted to know more, comics like *Commando* have acted as a teaching source, not only through its use of historical battles and sites in stories, but also through the inclusion of facts on equipment profiles, unit identification patches, badges and rank markers, wartime photos and quizzes. If nothing else, the accuracy of *Commando* comics provided an antidote to the careless way in which most films and television series from the 1960s and 1970s portrayed the Second World War.

As *Commando*'s editor, Calum Laird said:

> Antony Beevor or Max Hastings we ain't, but maybe we're a gateway to their interpretations of historical events. Commando strives to provide an authentic and accurate background to stories of action and adventure. We can, and I hope we do, deliver nuggets of history wrapped up in our

fictional narratives. That's all we can do. If that leads any of our readers to go on and look at the events we've touched on in more detail, we are delighted. (Laird 2014, personal communication)

Clarkson (2008) suggests the Second World War played a crucial role in popular memory across Europe and America, and indeed, across the rest of the world. This helped create 'a mass audience for war comics which focused on storylines dealing with that conflict'. That mass audience was met in the United States and the United Kingdom by the creation of mass market war comics, a product that dominated and eventually eliminated any localised view that might have arisen in Australia, New Zealand or elsewhere.

New Zealand and Australian comics at war

As producers of cultural artefacts, Australia and New Zealand have always been peripheral. In a classic model of structural imperialism, New Zealand has always been on Australia's periphery and thereafter Australia has always been on the periphery of the British, American and European markets. Thus it is not surprising that like their local film industries, comic production in these countries has long been dominated by imports.

With its small population, there was very little comic production in New Zealand prior to the Second World War; talented artists who might have fostered a local industry such as Maurice Bramley moved across 'the Ditch' to Sydney for better opportunities and wages or, like David Low, moved to London. Similarly, many Australian artists sought employment in the UK or in the United States. (Foster, 1998; Maurice Bramley, 2016). We have been unable to find any evidence of any war comic being produced in New Zealand between 1939-1945. In Australia, for a brief moment during the Second World War, when bans on the importation of non-essentials meant that American comics were not available, there was a so-called 'Golden Age' when local production flourished. Indeed, Chapman (2011) has argued that 'It is generally accepted that if there had not been a war there would never have been an Australian comic book industry'. The local industry survived for a time after the war and enjoyed a wide audience before it was overrun by American imports.

At its peak, Australia's comic-book industry was enormously successful. One study suggested that 50 million comic books, both reprints and local creations, were sold in Australia in 1951. (Juddery 2013)

The same pattern was repeated in Canada, where there was a sudden opportunity for local artists to find a wartime market, which they filled with locally-made comics that found a ready and appreciative market. Eventually local artists began to produce overtly nationalistic characters such as *Johnny Canuck* (Gray, 2017).[1]

We have been able to identify 13 war comics written and produced in Australia during and after the Second World War. They were:

- *Chesty Bond* (newspaper strip 1938-1964)
- *Wally and the Major* (newspaper strip and annuals, 1940-c1974)
- *Bluey and Curley* (newspaper strip and annuals, 1940-1975)
- *Tightrope Tim* (newspaper strip, 1941-1949)
- *Alec the Airman* (newspaper strip, 1941-1942)
- *Adolf, Hermann and Musso* (newspaper strip, c1941-1945)
- *Schmidt der Shpy* (newspaper strip, c1942-1945)
- *Wanda the War Girl* (newspaper strip, 1943-1951)
- *Tim Valour* (1948-1960s)
- *Skydemons* (1952)
- *Billy Battle* (1952-50s)
- *Avian Tempest* (1953-1950)
- *The Phantom Commando* (1959-c1970)

Single war cartoons were drawn in existing newspapers and magazines, as well as in new publications such as the Australian Army Journal *SALT*, the service

Figure 1: *Wally and the Major.*

personnel's newspaper *Guinea Gold,* or the 14 Australian War Memorial 1941-1945 Series books.

   Chesty Bond used a 1938 Bonds clothing advertising character and from 1940, he entered the war to fight the Nazis and to defeat the Japanese hordes,

clad for the occasion in his white, athletic singlet (Berry 2014). *Wally and the Major* (Figure 1) and *Bluey and Curley* (Figure 2) featured characters drawn from the Australian army. Wally Higgins, with Major Winks, a 1st Australian Imperial Force (AIF) veteran, serve together in Australia with the militia. Bluey is also a 1st AIF veteran and Curley is the young, enthusiastic recruit. They serve together in the 2nd AIF (Ryan 1979). Whereas *Bluey and Curley* is set in a fighting unit, *Wally and the Major* is set in Australia, where they are base-wallahs.

Each strip looked for the funny and the ridiculous aspects of army life, rather than depicting fighting. Both strips were put in collections, which were published in book forms

Figure 2: *Bluey and Curley*.

as annuals. *Tightrope Tim* was a comic strip in which the focus was more on wartime espionage than combat. *Alec the Airman* was another strip, but it made fun of life on a Royal Australian Air Force base. Both *Adolf, Hermann and Musso* and *Schmidt der Shpy* were comic strips satirising the Axis. There are unconfirmed reports that, as a result, the strip's cartoonist Jim Russell, was placed on a 'Hitler Black List' (http://thecartoonfactory.com.au/russell.html).

Wanda the War Girl was a full colour comic strip, in which the heroic—but frequently scantily-dressed—Wanda foiled a variety of Axis enemies (Figure 3). An obvious copy of the popular *Jane* comic strip from the *Daily Mirror* in the UK and meant as a wartime pin-up girl, she has nevertheless been described as one of the first comics to portray a female point of view (Chapman, 2011).

Of the wartime Australian comic strips identified, only *Wanda the War Girl*, *Chesty Bond*, *Bluey and Curley* and *Wally and the Major* continued into the 1950s, with their characters drawn in civilian life. For six years after the war, Kath O'Brien's *Wanda the War Girl* continued in the adventure/action comic strip called simply *Wanda,* where she worked as a spy or detective (Ryan 1979). 'Will' Mahoney's *Chesty Bond* continued in his role as the representative of the Bonds brand, with the strips having Chesty turn into a superhero, as soon as he revealed his Bond's white singlet (Digparty, 2016 http://www.digplanet.com/wiki/Chesty_Bond).
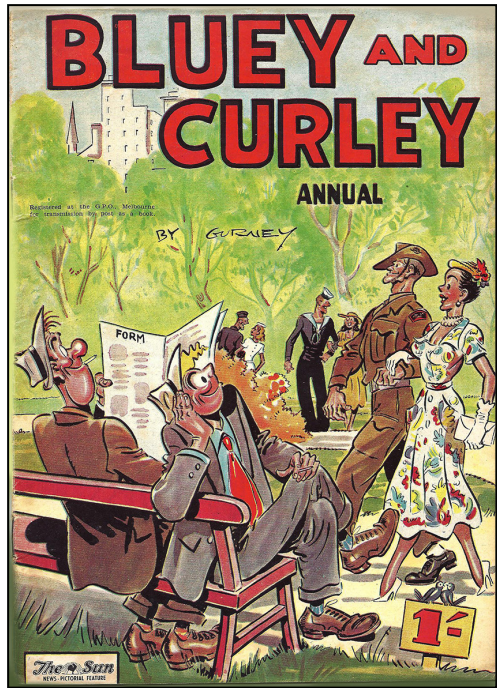
Alec Gurney's *Bluey and Curley* were working class characters, often depicted in their post-war lives as labourers. In their civilian guise, Stan Cross's *Wally and the Major* worked in a North Queensland sugar cane mill. The continued existence, for more than 30 years, of *Wally and the Major* and *Bluey and Curley* in peacetime, indicates that their popularity lay in their humorous depictions of the characters rather than in depictions of them as heroic soldiers. Yet it was each comic's wartime depictions that earned them the popularity that allowed them to continue post-war. Lindesay (1970) argued that *Bluey and Curley:*

Figure 3: *Wanda the War Girl.*

> became an Australian institution, as authentically a part of the popular Australian legend as Ned Kelly, or Phar Lap. They were so representative in looks, attitude, and language as to be perfectly acceptable to the Australian soldier.

Of *Wally and the Major* he wrote that *'...*physically there was typicality about the corpulent, foolish Pudden, the jovial grey-haired Major, and the undemonstrative, lanky and laconic Wally' (Lindesay, 1970) .

After the war, *The Phantom Commando*, *Avian Tempest, Billy Battle* and *Tim Valour* served as homes for adventure stories with a military (or at least a quasi-military) air. *Skydemons*, which was set during the Korean War, had a short print run. *Billy Battle* began as a part of each *Little Trimmer* comic and soon became the lead story. *Avian Tempest* is sometimes reminiscent of Edgar P. Jacobs' *Blake and Mortimer* stories, with its mixture of chaps with moustaches, science fiction elements and what was then cutting edge aviation technology. *Tim Valour* began as a science-fiction comic, before the lead character became a spy, who flew Sabres during the Korean War. Korea was a boon to Australian war comics, with characters such as *The Crimson Comet* (began 1949) occasionally entering the conflict to fight the Communist menace (Ryan, 1979). *The Phantom Commando* is set in the Second World War and the character flies a variety of aircraft, while based on a mysterious Indian Ocean island. It mirrors

the still popular comic book character *The Phantom. The Phantom Commando* is 'significant because it was the last, original Australian comic of the postwar era' (Comicsdownunder, 2007, http://comicsdownunder.blogspot.com.au/2007/09/unmasking-phantom-commando.html). Many of these titles were reprinted during the 1960s and early 1970s, where they became fillers for souvenir bags at annual agricultural shows.

The earlier reintroduction of American comics to New Zealand ended the brief existence of local comics there much sooner.

However, respite came, to Australia, in 1954, in response to a moral panic caused by Dr Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent: The Influence of Comic Books on Today's Youth*. (Lealand, 2016) American comics were banned again, although this time local artists found they were still competing with English imports.

They also had to contend with home grown moral panics. The publicity surrounding the trial for rape of Australian artist Len Lawson caused distributors Gordon and Gotch to impose censorship on local publications (Coville, J. http://www.psu.edu/dept/inart10_110/inart10/cmbk4cca.html; Finnane, 1998; Ryan, 1979).

Once American comics were allowed to be re-imported, local comics production was slowly, but inexorably, suffocated and Australian comic publishers soon resorted to just reprinting American titles, with US characters as the war heroes.

British war comics

The effective end of Australian war comics production by the early 1960s meant that comic depictions of Australians at war disappeared as well. With no local industry to speak of, depictions of New Zealanders and Australians at war came mainly from British comics. There were very few depictions of Australians in US war comics. What little there was seems to be reprints of Australian material. British war comics were more relevant to Australians and New Zealanders since these covered the period from the beginning of the war in September 1939 to December 6, 1941, before the United States became an active combatant.

There were serious differences in the style and content of the American comics, which were often based on superhero characters such as *Sergeant Rock* or *Sergeant Fury and His Howling Commandos*, *The Losers*, *The Unknown Soldier* or *The Haunted Tank*.[2] American comics were generally—but not always—larger than British comics and in colour, as opposed to the black and white of their British counterparts.

The first British war comics were launched by Amalgamated Press and Fleetway Library Publication. They were pocket-sized (although nobody has ever proven the claim that they were meant to fit inside the pocket of a squaddie's blouse) and consisted of the following titles:

- *War Picture Library* (September 1958 to December 1984)
- *Air Ace Library* (1960 to 1970)
- *Battle Picture Library* (January 1961 to December 1984)
- *War at Sea Picture library* (1962-1963)
- *Action Picture Library* (1969-1970)

In competition, D.C. Thomson launched *Commando War Stories in Pictures*. The official date for the first two issues was 27 June 1961. *Commando* comics were in a class of their own. They looked different and were of a higher quality, perfect bound rather than stapled and with a colour cover that wrapped around to cover half the back page, where there was a summary of the story. In contrast, the Picture Library comics carried advertising on the back page with spot colour, often for cheap jewellery.

Battle Picture Library editor Steve Holland attributed this proliferation of British war comics from 1958-62 to the appearance of a ready and willing post-war market:

> Thanks to the post-war baby boom, the late 1950s and early 1960s were filled with the cries of children, 'What did you do in the war, Dad?' Biographies of war heroes were topping the bestsellers charts and the film industry was quick to catch on with blockbuster movies such as *The Dambusters* and *Reach for the Sky.* (Ogg, 2014)

Rech (2014) describes the depiction of British and Commonwealth servicemen as having becoming the exclusive province of comics like *Commando*, which emphasised the experiences of individuals working inside a platoon, a squad or with a single partner.

> Translated and recycled 'numerous times for new audiences in Europe, Scandinavia' (Conroy, 2009, p. 108) and India (Ribbens, 2010), the medium tapped into and reproduced the ideologically straightforward, 'good big war.' (Rech, 2014) '… Their characters' 'exploits were not more outrageous than the tales the readers might have heard from their [veteran] fathers and grandfathers.' (Conroy, 2009, p. 108)

Launched from between 13 to 17 years after the end of the Second World War, these British comics could employ contributors who were often returned servicemen, thus guaranteeing a degree of accuracy often missing in US war comics of the same period. *Commando* is the only British war comic still in production.

British it might be, but not English, for unlike the Library comics, *Commando* was produced by Scottish publisher, D.C. Thomson and has provided a monthly diet of adventure and derring-do for more than 50 years. Once primarily concerned with the Second World War, *Commando* now tells stories from a variety

of conflicts and feature characters from dozens of nations or time periods, even venturing into science fiction.

Commando comics have had a marked effect on popular culture, especially in the UK, where they provided stylistic inspiration for many punk bands and for major players in the 1980s New Wave of British Heavy Metal, such as Iron Maiden. The cover art for Iron Maiden songs like 'Aces High', 'Tail Gunner' and 'The Trooper' would not look out of place on the cover of a *Commando* comic. Briefly printed in Germany to save costs, sales of *Commando* have fallen from a peak of about 800,000 in the 1980s (Ogg 2014; McBeth 2013).

ANZACs

With a readership throughout the British Commonwealth and across the globe, *Commando* publishes stories featuring non-British characters. If you visit the *Commando* home page you can see stories based on many nationalities. Among them are members of a strange breed called 'ANZACs'. We have not been able to find an 'Anzacland' or 'Anzaclandia' but it appears to be a mythical antipodean realm from which Australians and New Zealanders originate.[3] (www.commandocomics.com/)

Depictions of Australian and New Zealanders in English comics were not entirely new when *Commando* was launched. In 1933, the English comic *Triumph* published a story about the Australians in what was then referred to as the Great War. 'The Fighting Freelance' told the story of Kit Carson, who smuggled himself aboard a troopship bound for Europe after being rejected by the army, declaring: 'Here's the Germans marching on Paris, and yet you turn your noses at a willing volunteer! It's enough to make a cobber sick—square dinkum it is.' Quite why an Australian was named after an American frontiersman and how the expression 'fair dinkum' became so mangled remain a mystery (Riche, 2009).

For *Commando*, the use of ANZACs in a story is highly valued. Former *Commando* editor George Low said in 2007:

> …a struggling script-writer who couldn't get one particular plot right. His idea was just too ordinary and didn't have sparkle. …all seemed lost until, finally, the author brightened up and said, 'What if I made it Aussies? It would seem a lot more exciting then.
>
> …he did have a point. Somehow the inclusion of the word ANZAC fires the imagination and opens up new angles to get the reader turning the page to see what happens next. (Low, 2007)

Indeed, in only its second issue, *They Call Him Coward* featured Australians in New Guinea in 1942. An instant attention-grabber in Australia for this then-new war comic, it prompted interest and promoted future sales.

But how accurate were the *Commando* depictions of Australians and New

Zealanders? While the stories were not that outrageous, the artwork is often problematic. This is because the artwork was mostly outsourced to South American or European artists, who could be employed cheaply. So for the young reader growing up in the Antipodes it is likely that the thrilling tale of daring Australians defeating Rommel single-handedly was published by a Scot, written by an Englishman and drawn by an Argentinian.

Commando editor Calum Laird described the process of creating a *Commando* comic:

> Virtually all *Commando* artwork is done by freelance contributors; the numbers done by in-house artists can be counted on the numbers of one hand. They have been illustrated principally by Spanish-speaking artists in Spain or South America. The artists are given picture descriptions for each scene indicating which characters are in the scene, their expressions, what order they speak in and what action is going on. In addition, character descriptions are given at the beginning of the story to allow the artist to have an image of each character, their build, hair colour, uniform, equipment, etc. (Laird, 2014, personal communication).

So what is the typical *Commando* ANZAC like? We spoke informally to several people who grew up reading *Commando* and other British war comics in Australia and one of the most common observations about the way Australians are depicted was a general impression that they were disrespectful towards officers, especially 'Pommies'; always stuck up for their mates and were often called Bluey or Snowy. They spoke in slang that was no longer in universal usage within Australia, even by the 1960s when *Commando* appeared. They were wild colonial boys and rugby players in tiny shorts; but mostly, they kept losing their shirts.

> Shirts off and Australians. Why do the two always go together? Without fail Australian war picture comic troops are always keen to throw off their kit and show off their chests. The other typical traits of Australians in these stories are their disregard for authority and their fearless fighting ability and spirit. (Pocket War Comics, 2011, http://pocketwarcomics.blogspot.co.nz/2011/07/war-picture-library-135-big-arena.html)

The depictions of Australians in *Commando* is a long way from *Bluey and Curley* or *Wally and the Major*. *Bluey and Curley*, in particular, mirror the lanky larrikin stereotype played so often in films and television by Australian character actor Chips Rafferty (1909-1971). At this distance, *Chesty Bond* looks like a self-referential joke, a character so absurd that it is hard to imagine that he was ever taken as a serious depiction of the Australian fighting man.

We know that not everybody calls everybody else 'cobber'… and not

> every second Aussie is called 'Bluey' or 'Snowy' …..and not every Kiwi is
> built like a rugby forward … but it makes for part of the fun. (Low, 2007)

It is difficult, of course, to make a direct comparison between Australian war-time comics and *Commando*. Worcester (Chapman et al., 2016) argues that wartime comics and comics about war cannot be regarded as being the same thing because of the different cultural and social settings and expectations. Yet one could argue that the early *Commando* scriptwriters, with their direct experience of the Second World War, were perfectly capable of bringing something very close to an authentic wartime view to their work.

However, the importance assigned to *mentalités*—'questions of opinion, attitude, discourse and mode of thought'—by Chapman et al. (2015) allow us to argue that that they in fact allow the writer to make attitudes and ideas from a certain era tangible. Indeed, Laird argues that the use of archaic Australian slang in Commando comics is a way of invoking the past (Laird, personal communication, 2017).

Unfortunately, *Commando* did not originally give credit to its contributors. While progress has been made in identifying artists and writers from existing records, some details still remain obscure. It is sometimes hard to know who wrote what story, or who drew which pictures, or painted which covers. If one could identify the author of every *Commando* story and know whether they served during the 1939-45 conflict one could argue on a case-by-case basis as to how much of the opinions and attitudes of the war they had made tangible. The difficulty lies with the *Commando* artists. *Commando* used two artists, hired cheaply through agencies, for each comic; one to draw the story and one for the covers and artists. (Low, 2011; Bishop, interview, 2015). It is highly unlikely that the Spanish or South American artists served during the Second World War and their cultural separation from the events and people depicted is often obvious.

Given *Commando*'s reputation for detail it is not surprising that depictions of uniforms and weapons is quite accurate, but backgrounds are sometimes inaccurate and supporting characters occasionally go astray. In *Island of Fear*, for instance, the lead character is dressed in a mix of indigenous regalia from New Guinea, while his followers—supposedly Dayaks from Borneo—can best be described as 'the natives' from central casting (Low, 2006).

In *Killing Zone*, set on the northern coast of New Guinea, the artist appears to have used pictures from East Africa as a guide to the peoples of New Guinea. At least one of them appears to be wearing a Muslim skull cap and the general impression is that they belong more in Mombasa than Madang (Low, 2006).

It is the covers where real problems arise. The Australian soldier on the front of *Jap Killer!* (Figure 4) with his beard, ragged clothes and Lee Enfield looks close enough to how we might imagine the soldier in the background of Figure 2

would look after a few days in the jungle. This is Sergeant 'Snowy' Cutmore. Of whom the back page blurb says:

> The day didn't start right for Snowy unless he'd knocked off a couple of Japs before breakfast. Every Jap sniper knew and feared the giant Sergeant with the matchless jungle craft and killing power.' (*Commando* No. 15)

Cutmore was back a few months later in *This Man is Dangerous*, having landed in Italy and itching, so we are told, 'to get at Nazi throats with the same cold steel the little yellow men had come to fear so much' (*Commando* No. 36). By now the cover artist has transformed him into a crazed madman trying to tear out a grenade pin with his teeth. Needless to say there were no Australian infantry in Italy.

Figure 4: Commando: *Jap Killer!*

Even when depicting British troops in the jungle, the use of South American

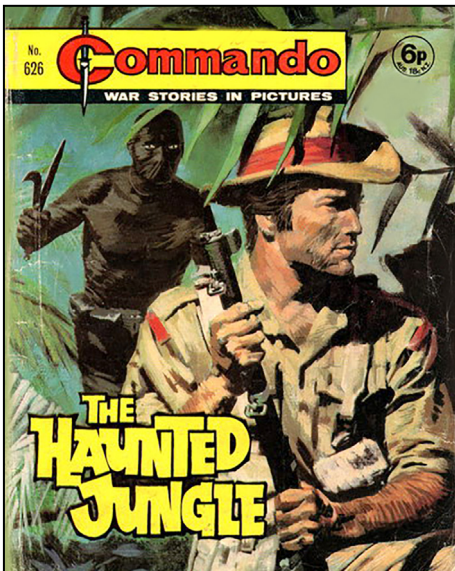Figure 5. Commando: *The Haunted Jungle.*
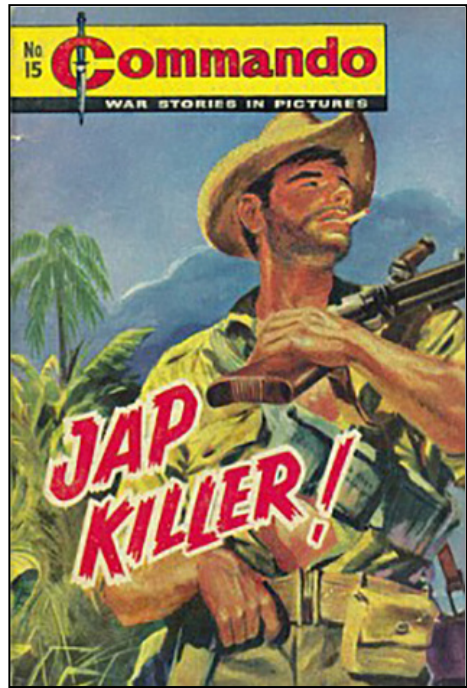
artists led to anomalies. The figure in the foreground of the cover of *The Haunted Jungle* (Figure 5), for instance, looks like he might be at home in the remoter parts of the Amazon or the stews of Marseilles, a villain from Garth or Modesty Blaise, but not a hero from *Commando*.

The cover of *They Called Him Coward* (Figure 6) is just wrong; too blonde, too cute, his shorts far too short and he should be carrying an Australian Owen sub-machine gun, not a US Thompson gun.

When we showed the cover of *They Called Him Coward* at the Media, War and Memory conference at Auckland University of Technology it provoked

Figure 6. Commando: *They Called Him Coward!*

an immediate reaction from the audience, the gist of which was that the image was homoerotic. Given the date of *They Called Him Coward's* publication (1961), one might echo the question posed by Janes (2012):

> …is a process of (homo)sexualisation being applied to images which were the product of a more innocent age and which were intended, in fact, to express normative modes of gender performance?

While there has been some research on homoeroticism and gender in comics in general (and superheroes, in particular) there appears to be little on war comics per se and we have been unable to find anything dealing with *Commando* comics.

In its first year of publication, *Commando* published a story dealing with the New Zealand Land Wars, *The Māori Challenge*. The historical background to the story appears to be well researched, the uniforms and incidental details are well done and the story presents the war within the parameters often found in *Commando* comics and one which reflected the then prevalent view of the Land Wars: Māori and Pākehā live in peace, but fight after bad Pākehā stir up trouble, the Pākehā win, Māori and Pākehā are reconciled, learn to live together and their descendants later fight side by side against the Germans.

The story was included in the *Anzacs at War* compilation when it appeared in 2007. A year later, *The New Zealand Herald*, perhaps scenting a controversy, ran a story citing complaints that the comic was racist for describing the Māori as cannibals and quoting an academic as saying it could undermine the Treaty of Waitangi. (Milne, 2008) The story appeared several months before the publication of New Zealand academic Paul Moon's history of cannibalism among the Māori, *This Horrid Practice*, which caused an uproar, and reflects some of the sensitivity around the issue.

In fact, there is just one brief exchange about cannibalism in the comic: 'Luke, I've heard that Māoris eat their enemies.' 'At times—just to show respect.' (Low, 2007) This reflected the view prevalent at the time of the comic's publication that Māori cannibalism was ritualistic rather than gustatory, a partaking of the slain enemy's mana. Moon, on the other hand, argued that in fact cannibalism was widespread and essentially a way of humiliating the dead. Laird was unimpressed by the *Herald* article when we brought it to his attention, declaring:

> A great deal of research and experience does go into each and every Commando story—unlike *The New Zealand Herald* article which seems based on a largely uninformed vox pop. The contributors do not seem to have read any of the material. I would doubt very much if the Māori have ever been referred to as cannibals. *Commando* suffers from the perception that it is racist in its attitudes because many observers 'know' it is. Usually without having read any copies properly. Others who do read the material decide it is racist on the grounds that the one racial group or another may be described by some derogatory epithet. You cannot depict 'bad' people without them saying 'bad' things. Is Stephen Spielberg an anti-semite because some of the characters in *Schindler's List* say anti-semitic things? No matter what portrayal of a colonial war is attempted, it will not satisfy everybody. That's the nature of the human condition; everyone has a different viewpoint and many are irreconcilable with others (Laird, 2014, personal communication).

Since then, *Commando*'s New Zealanders have appeared in stories about 20th century conflicts and as such have been classified as ANZACS, alongside Australians. However, unless the Kiwis are soldiers wearing lemon squeezer hats, readers cannot tell one from the other and so they blend into a subset of rugged and colourful colonials.

After the war

By the early 1990s, with comic collections promoted as an investment strategy, the wide range of comics on open sale disappeared almost overnight. Comics became the exclusive preserve of collectors' comic book stores. *Commando* was still sold in newsagents or other non-specialist shops but to the older, nostalgic comic buyer, who just wanted a quick read and bought it on the way home, rather than going through the 'serious collector' treatment experienced at the small, elitist comic book stores. Unless people were prepared to pay up to A$17 for rare copies of *The Phantom Commando* on e-bay, locally produced war comics remained unobtainable.

Local depictions of Australians at war in comic form (or, in their latest incarnation, graphic novels) did not reappear until the 21st century.

From 2012, Z Beach True Comics in Australia began producing a limited series of graphic novels about Australians during the First and Second World Wars, including *Gallipoli: The Landing* and *Kokoda: That Bloody Track* (Dolan, et al., 2012) and *Reg Saunders: An indigenous War Hero* (Dolan & Threlfall, 2015). Stiffly drawn and overloaded with text, they look like well-intentioned classroom resource, utterly lacking in the vibrancy of *Commando* comics, reminiscent of the 1950s-1960s *Classics Illustrated* that depicted famous novels. Other graphic novels dealing with Australia's wars have included *The Sacrifice* (Mutard, 2008).

As noted earlier, New Zealand cartoonists and comic artists who wanted to make a living mostly emigrated, but activity did not entirely cease. Russell Gore drew the 'It Happened in New Zealand' comic strips during the 1950s for newspapers and appears to have depicted episodes of the Land Wars, in particular, those involving the Prussian soldier-of-fortune Gustav von Tempsky (Lealand, 2016).

Lealand describes the strips as crudely drawn and notes: 'It is also a little ironic that Gore chose to write history using drawing, text and speech bubbles for such a form ['comics'] was not highly valued in New Zealand society in the 1950s.'

Crude though they were, the 'It Happened in New Zealand' strips were popular enough to be gathered together in several volumes.

Apart from the brain drain of artists to Australia and the United Kingdom, former *New Zealand Herald* journalist and editor of the ground-breaking comic *2000AD,* David Bishop, cited economic and cultural constraints as major factors in the slow development of comics in New Zealand and especially the lack of war comics:

> New Zealand had a massive cultural cringe, so depictions of New Zea-
> landers by New Zealanders were few and far between. We had to look
> overseas. There was no way for comic creators to support themselves in
> New Zealand. They had to leave the country. Arts council grants didn't
> apply to low brow culture. (Bishop 2015, interview)

As it did in Australia, Gordon and Gotch had a monopoly on newspaper and
magazine distribution. These were the days when New Zealand's heavily pro-
tected economy and isolated culture made it look like the East Germany of
the South Seas. People had to seek written permission from the New Zealand
Postmaster General's office to import a foreign magazine.

Anybody wanting to create a local war comic, after the 1960s, would also
have faced an uphill battle, Bishop said, because the Vietnam War had created a
hippy anti-war culture. War, he said, became something of which to be ashamed.

Conclusion

While home-grown war comics might have been as elusive as the moa, reading
Commando comics seems to have been a common experience for a number of
New Zealand artists. These included James Davidson, who bought 'piles of Com-
mando comics for next to nothing at the local used bookshop' (Kinnaird, 2013)
and film director Vince Ward, who remembers growing up 'with *Mickey Mouse*
and *Commando* comics—basically war comics and Disney' (Kinnaird, 2013).

Eventually, however, with the backing of the New Zealand Education De-
partment, earlier this century a small number of graphic novels dealing with
the experiences of Kiwis at war appeared. These include *Hautipua Rerarangi/
Born to Fly* (Arahanga 2012) and *Ngarimu Te Tohu Toa/Victory at Point 209*
(Burda, 2012). Both are in Te Reo and English and are about the achievements
of Māori servicemen. In *Ngarimu Te Tohu Toa*, Māori deities appear over the
North African battlefield as the Māori Battalion advances on the German lines.

In 2011, Chris Grosz produced *Kimble Bent: Malcontent*, which told the
story of an American sailor washed up in New Zealand, who fights for the Māori
during the Land Wars. (Kinnaird, 2013). Published that same year was *A Nice
Day for a War* by Chris Slane and Matt Elliott. Significantly, *Commando* played a
role to play in its creation—as something they did not want to copy. Elliott said:

> We decided it wasn't going to be a *Commando* comic. It was going to be
> a reaction to all that sort of thing. We were still going to get some of those
> spectacular elements in there, but also show the grimness of the soldier's
> life, the reality of it. (Kinnaird, 2013, pp. 94-95)

The modern graphic novel format allows artists to develop characters and stories
in ways that *Commando* cannot. However, given the cost and effort required to

produce comics and the uncertainty of ever making a living from them (and self-publishing is the only option for many New Zealand artists) it appears unlikely that home-grown depictions of Australians and New Zealanders at war will ever appear with any regularity.

Both, however, have their place and are aimed at different parts of the market. Away from specialised comic shops and the rarified world of collectors, *Commando* still holds its place, providing its readers with a gateway to history and giving its readers in however an exaggerated form, a glimpse of the role Australia and New Zealand have played in the world's wars. For the mythological ANZACS, *Commando* comics will continue to be their home.

Notes

1. The state of comic production in the other former Commonwealth Dominions is a matter for further investigation. In South Africa the situation appears to have been complicated by the pro-German stance of much of the Boer population and a fragmented market. There were daily editorial cartoons in newspapers and collections of cartoons in service journals, but there does not appear to have been anything like a war comic as we have described them. After the war, *Commando* and other British war comics were available in South Africa and what was then Rhodesia, just as they were in Australia and New Zealand. However, even when there was a resurgence of South African comics in the 1970s, these appear to have been largely done in the Italian style as *fumetti*, using posed photographs rather than cartoons. There were no stories about the Second or First World Wars, but contemporary combat stories in titles like *Grensvegter*. Commando was available in India and there is now a burgeoning war comic industry where local publishers draw on that country's wars with China and Pakistan for patriotic stories. The authors would welcome any information on war comics produced in India or South Africa during the period described here.
2. The latter crossed over into the supernatural with the frequent appearance of the ghosts of Confederate cavalry leader General Jeb Stuart and Union General Phil Sheridan.
3. The term A.N.Z.A.C. stands for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. It should only apply to the troops serving at Gallipoli, the Greek Islands in 1915, the Western Front in 1916-1917, or in the Greek and Cretan campaign in 1941. The term 'ANZAC' may be a popular label, but is inaccurate. For Australians, 'Digger' is the better term, but it is not a term that has much currency outside Australia.

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Dr Philip Cass is senior lecturer in the Master of International Communication programme at Unitec, Auckland, New Zealand, and associate editor of Pacific Journalism Review. *Dr Jonathan (Jack) Ford is a professional historian and a former member of the Brisbane City Council's Heritage Unit. He has undertaken major surveys of that city's surviving wartime architecture and was for many years a member of the Australian Broadcasting Corporations' Anzac Day commentary team in Brisbane. This article is based on an earlier paper presented to the Media, War and Memory conference, Auckland University of Technology, 18-19 September 2014.*
cass.philip@gmail.com