

A BEARCAGE FILMS DOCUMENTARY

THE DIGGER

THE TRUE STORY OF AUSTRALIA'S GREATEST LEGEND

A **STUDY GUIDE** ROBERT LEWIS



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OVERVIEW



The Digger (Serge Ou, 2011, 84 minutes) presents a portrait of the Australian soldier. It is not a detailed chronological history, but selects key moments, battles and individuals to offer a portrait of the iconic figure.

Through a sequence of pivotal battles it tells the story of the typical Australian soldier, and shows the emergence of a type of fighting man with an international reputation as non-conformist, disrespectful, loose of discipline, and unparalleled as a shock troop or soldier able to function on his own initiative.

In South Africa they had become soldiers but were still not Australians when they fought the Boers. The film focuses on the siege at Elands River to see the start of the Digger tradition.

Gallipoli is where the national legend has it that Australia became a nation, but these soldiers became 'diggers' on the Western Front, where they were blooded at a place called Fromelles, and showed their full development at Villers-Bretonneux.

Twenty-five years later the legend of the digger grew to maturity in battles at El Alamein, Milne Bay, Kokoda, and even among the prisoners of war of the Japanese.

The greatest American honour available to a unit, the Presidential Citation, was first awarded to Australians at Kapyong in Korea, and later at Long Tan in Vietnam.

The story has been filmed on location in eight countries, and features five wars. It uses anecdotes, jokes and songs, letters, diaries, archival film and photographs, memoirs, animated graphics and re-enactments of both the military actions and off-duty conduct to present the portrait.

The story of the digger is full of high drama, diverse landscape, diverse characters, terrible and terribly funny stories. At its core is an exploration of one of the central elements of Australia's cultural identity.



CURRICULUM APPLICABILITY

The Digger is a resource that can be used at Years 9–12 in History to study:

- » the development of a significant aspect of Australian national identity
- » the nature of Australia's experience of war
- » the way history is constructed.

EXPLORING IDEAS AND ISSUES IN THE FILM

Anglo-Boer War

The Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) was a conflict that pitted the professional British Army and volunteers from the British Empire (including the Australian colonies and New Zealand) against the Boer residents of South Africa. It was the first time Australian troops fought in battle, though they fought as members of their individual colonies, and not as an Australian national force.

- 1 The main focus of this section of the film is the Siege of Elands River. What qualities or characteristics of the Australians emerge here?
- 2 Another example that could have been used to discuss the Australians' behaviour was the conflict at Wilmansrust in 1901 – where the Australians behaved incompetently, and even in some cases in a cowardly way. How might a historian decide which example is the better one for showing the typical qualities of the Australian troops?

World War 1

Australians fought in three major areas during World War One: at Gallipoli in 1915, then on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918, and in Palestine between 1916 and 1918.

- 3 The film looks at a number of individual soldiers. Look at the stories that are presented of these soldiers, and explain what each helps us to understand about the Digger.

INDIVIDUALS	QUALITIES OR CHARACTERISTICS OR WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THEM ABOUT THE DIGGER
Roland Shawyer	
John Jensen	
Corsie, Collins and Wright	
Wemyss Benjamin Speechley	
Robert Mactier	
Leonard Westgarth, Burton Hamlyn, Terence Finnigan	
Thomas James Bede Kenny	

- 4 What general picture is given of the Digger?

- 5 The film quotes some evidence to establish its image of the Digger. Other evidence might give a different picture. Look at these quotations by or about Australian soldiers, taken from historian Bill Gammage's book *The Broken Years* (first published in 1974), about the Australian soldiers' experience of World War One. Decide in each case if the quotation fits the image created in *The Digger*.

QUOTATION	AGREES OR DISAGREES WITH THE IMAGE
A. 'The Australian is not a soldier, but a fighter' (p.100)	
B. 'We heard a British officer say "Hey you men, why don't you salute?" We told him we were Australians, but the officer said he did not care who we were, we would have to salute before we passed that way, so we said we would go the long way rather than salute him.' (p.101)	
C. I saw several men sacrifice themselves here, they went to certain death, one chap in particular I remember ... we were cashing some Turks round a little sap & they reached the bend first, everyone knew the first man round the corner was a dead one, but this chap never hesitated, he threw himself fair at them, & six fired together, & fairly riddled him with bullets, that was our chance & we into them, & it was all over in a few minutes. (p.116)	
D. Ones nerves get very nervy, having to be on a continual strain of looking, watching and listening all the time. You will see some chaps walking along when all of a sudden they will duck behind something and get under cover when it is only a steam boat blowing off steam. Everyone laughs at the time but still nearly everyone gets doing it some time. (p.89)	
E. ... Up the hill ... we swarm ... the lust to kill is on us, we see red. Into one trench, out of it, and into another. Oh! The bloody gorgeousness of feeling your bayonet go into soft yielding flesh – they run, we after them, no thrust one and parry, in goes the bayonet the handiest way. (p.111)	

- 6 Quotes A–C probably support the film's image of the Digger, quotes D and E probably challenge it. Why would some characteristics or qualities of the Australian soldier be stressed, and others ignored or played down?
- 7 How would a historian decide what weight to give different, perhaps conflicting, characteristics?

World War Two

In World War Two (1939–1945) Australians fought on land, sea and in the air, mostly in North Africa and the Middle East, at Malaya and Singapore, and in New Guinea and nearby islands. For the first time, some Australian troops were conscripts, rather than all volunteers.

- 8 What does *The Digger* say the battle of El Alamein showed about the Australian soldier?
- 9 What did Milne Bay show?
- 10 What did Kokoda show?
- 11 *The Digger* also looks at the Australian prisoners of war of the Japanese as part of the Digger tradition. These men did not fight, and few tried to escape. Some were treated appallingly, especially the Burma-Thai Railway working parties and those used as slave labour in Japan. How can these men, who after their capture were not engaged in fighting, be said to be part of the Digger tradition? What qualities that were typical or characteristic of the Digger did they show?

Korea and Vietnam

In the Korean War (1950–1953) Australians were part of a United Nations force that supported South Korea against the invading North Koreans, and later Chinese support. In the Vietnam War (1962–1972) Australia, with many of its forces being conscripts, supported South Vietnam against North Vietnamese forces, supported by local guerrilla units known as the Viet Cong. Australia was one of several nations (including the United States, New Zealand, Thailand, and South Korea) to provide active military support.

- 12 How did the Australians continue to show the qualities of the Digger?
- 13 What was special about the contribution of Reg Saunders in Korea?

- 14 Many nations have pride in their soldiers. Which, if any, of the qualities and characteristics of the Digger presented in this film might be unique to Australians? Why?
- 15 The Digger is a man. Only men have been involved in combat in the wars explored in this film. Women are increasingly members of the Australian Defence Force, and, while not infantry troops, are often now in situations, especially in Afghanistan, where they may be involved in armed conflict. Can women be part of the Digger tradition? Discuss your ideas.
- 16 *The Digger* uses a variety of elements to create its effect. Discuss how each of the following elements or features of the film contributes to the overall result. Are all elements effective?

ELEMENT	COMMENT
The presenter	
The use of a variety of sites	
The structure of the film into several wars	
The emphasis on stories of individuals	
The use of re-enactments	
The limited use of experts (unlike most documentaries)	



17 The director and producer have said this about the film:

Director Serge Ou

Making this film meant following in the diggers' footsteps to places that were horrific in their experience and, in dramatised scenes, recreating those terrible circumstances in which the legend was forged. I feel that in following the hundred year story I met the digger. I hope the viewer will feel the same. By the end of this journey, the definition of the Digger will be a personal one – but admiration, pride, and empathy will be universal.

Producer Michael Tear

We had to ask ourselves how do we carry this important story and do it the justice it truly deserves, as we all felt a strong sense of responsibility to the subject matter. In the end I believe my team has risen to the challenge and has created a film of which we are all very proud, one that will provide audiences with a new perspective on our history and through that, our identity as a nation.

Do you think these hopes have been achieved in *The Digger*? Explain your reasons.



FURTHER INFORMATION

STUDIES is an educational magazine published by Ryebuck Media and sent to every secondary school in Australia free of charge three times a year. Recent classroom units have been:

- » 'The Battle of Fromelles and what it tells us about the nature of war on the Western Front' *STUDIES* 3/2010
- » 'Exploring the Spirit of Anzac' *STUDIES* 2/2010
- » 'What is the Spirit of Anzac? Is it relevant to young Australians today?' *STUDIES* 1/2010

See <http://www.ryebuck.com.au/studies.php>

Department of Veterans' Affairs
http://www.dva.gov.au/commems_oawg/commemorations/education/Pages/education%20resources.aspx

These resources are available online from the DVA

- » *Gallipoli and the Anzacs* (2010)
- » *Australian Prisoners of War* (2009)
- » *Operation CLICK – Anzac to Kokoda* (2007)
- » *Australians at War* (2005)

Websites

- » Australians at War
<http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au>
- » Australians on the Western front 1914-1918
<http://www.w1westernfront.gov.au>
- » Australians at War Film Archive
<http://www.australiansatwarfilmarchive.gov.au/aawfa>
- » Australia and the Vietnam War
<http://vietnam-war.commemoration.gov.au>
- » Gallipoli and the Anzacs
<http://anzacsite.gov.au>
- » Australia's War 1939–1945
<http://ww2australia.gov.au>



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