

**“Keto dogs!”**

**The ANZAC image in *Commando* comics**



**Dr Philip Cass and Dr Jack Ford**

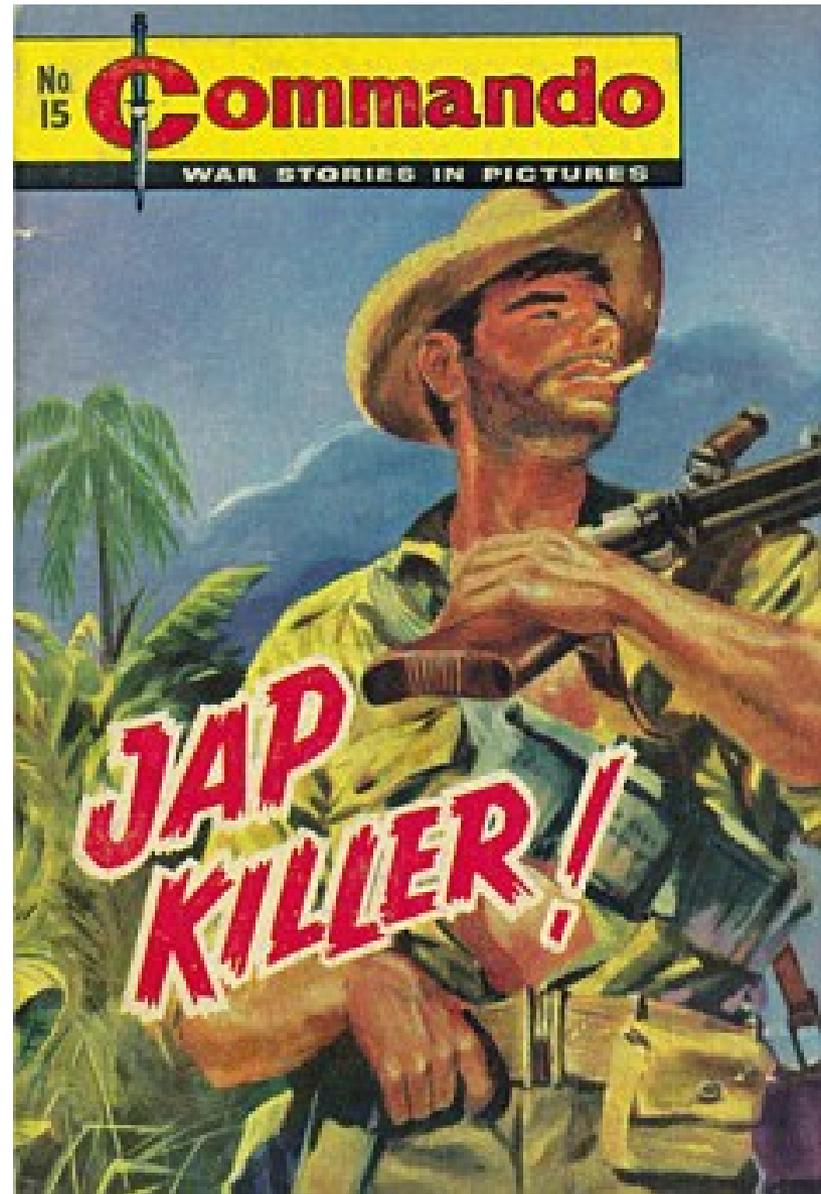
## **PHILIP**

For generations of Australians and New Zealanders, *Commando* Comics have provided a consistent image of their people at war. Inevitably tall, bronzed and contemptuous of authority, their ability as warriors is such that their mere presence on the battlefield is enough to have the Germans crying “Donner und blitzen!” the Italians “Sapristi!” and the Japanese “Aieeee!”

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 ANZACs?

And what happens when *Commando* attempts to deal with historical issues such as the Land Wars?

The answers to these questions also provide answers to larger questions. Drawing on work by Ross Laurie (2014), Maurico Castro and Alicia Decker (2012), Cord Scott (2011), Alexander Clarkson (2008) and Mel Gibson (2008)- and acknowledging the ongoing AHRC-funded project on comics and the world wars being carried out by Jane Chapman - this paper seeks to ask what function they perform as sources of history, creators of national imagery and ideas of soldiering.



## War comics in Australia and New Zealand

At least seven war comics were produced in Australia before the 1960s. A distinction can be made between newspaper comic strip compilations (e.g. *Footrot Flats*) and comic books, which had one or more stories. The seven were:

*Bluey and Curly* (newspaper strip)

*Wally and the Major* (newspaper strip)

*Wanda the War Girl* (WW II only)

*Chesty Bond* (WW II only)

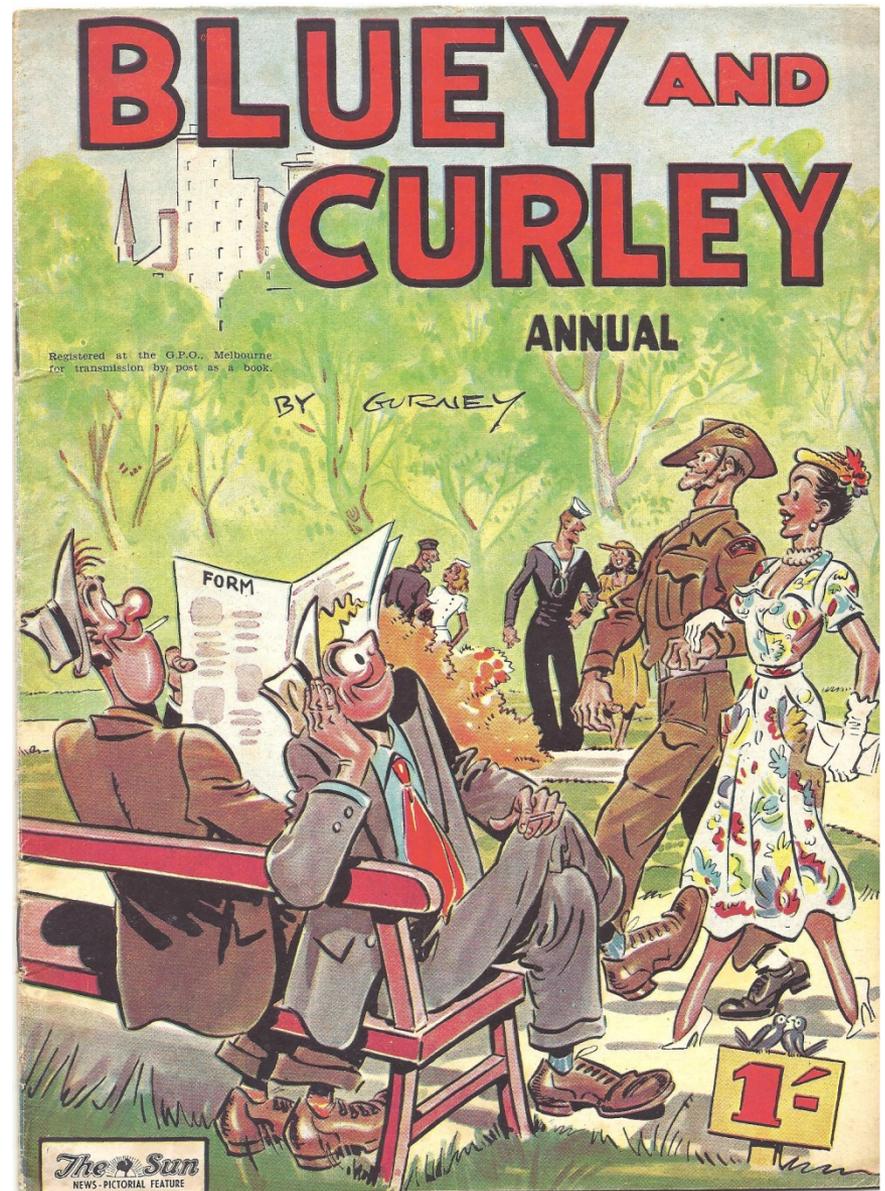
*The Phantom Commando* (1950s)

*Avian Tempest* (1950s)

*Billy Battle* (1950s)

*Wanda the War Girl* was a full colour comic, in which the heroic - but frequently scantily-dressed - Wanda foiled a variety of Axis enemies. She was an obvious copy of the popular *Jane* comic strip from the *Daily Mirror* in the UK. *Chesty Bond* used an already existing advertising character to fend off the Japanese hordes, clad for the occasion in his white, athletic singlet.

Of the Australian WWII comics, only *Bluey and Curly* and *Wally and the Major* titles continued after the war, with their characters drawn in civilian life. This may indicate that their popularity lay in their depiction of the funny, Australian larrikin rather than serious, heroic soldier.

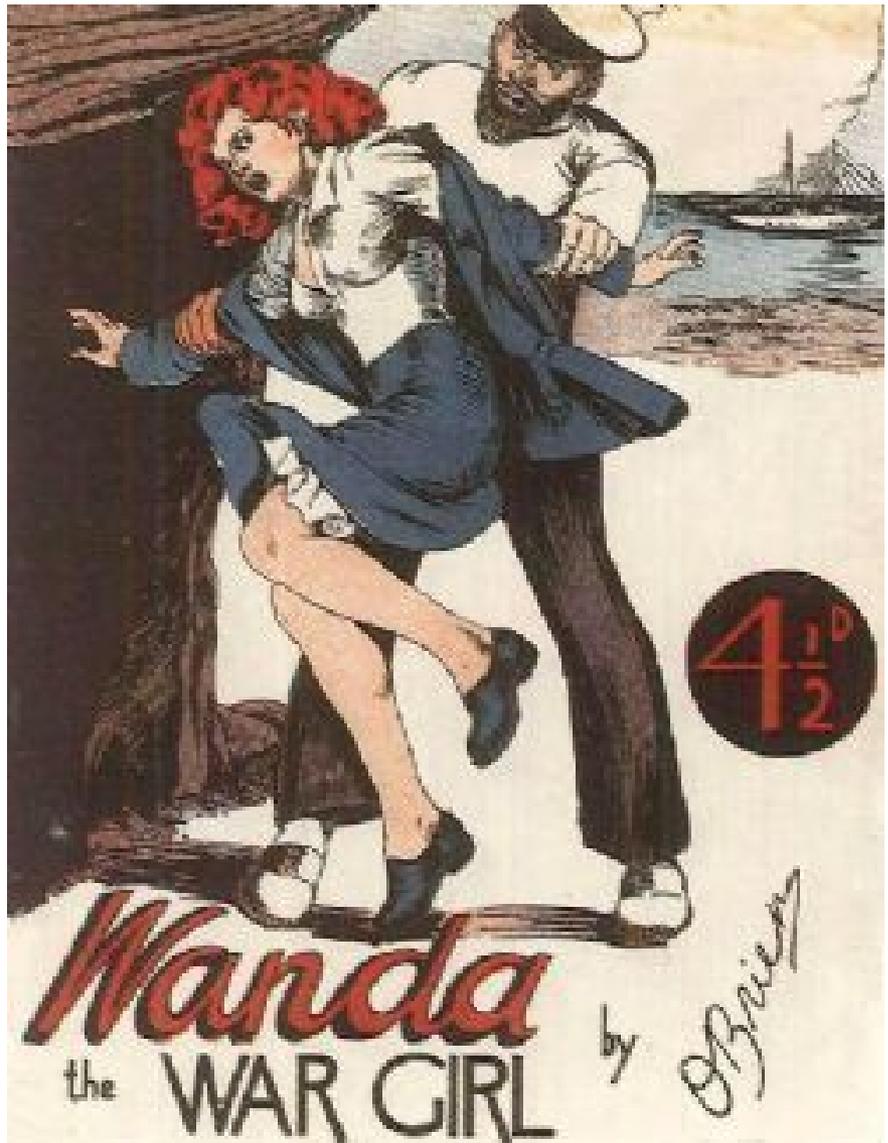


The other 1950s war comics were monthly productions featuring a variety of characters, some of them clearly ex-servicemen, in a variety of adventures. We have yet to find anyone who has seen copies of *Billy Battle*, *The Phantom Commando* or *Avian Tempest* outside the expensive world of comic collecting. This month the starting ebay price of a *The Phantom Commando* comic was \$17.

The importation of comics was banned during the war as an austerity measure. This made a market for locally produced comics in Australia and New Zealand. This ban was lifted after the war but then partly reinstated in the 1950s. The part-ban came as a result of moral panic caused by the book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which claimed that US horror comics presented a grave, moral threat to antipodean children. The later resumption of full importation sounded the death knell for local artists, but not for printers and distributors. They continued to produce local versions of US imported titles, such as *Felix the Cat* (ironically, an Australian creation) or *The Phantom*.

To the best of our knowledge, no war comics were produced in New Zealand during World War II or after. This may be because the best New Zealand comic artists had gone to work in Australia.

The 1950s are referred to as the 'Silver Age' of comics due to their influence here, pre-television. We disagree, as there were larger numbers and more variety of comics produced in the 1960s.



JACK

## History of *Commando* comics

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 dominated US war comics because the stories were more relevant to Australians. They had stories covering the period 1 September 1939 to 6 December 1941, when the US was not in WWII. As well, US war comics tended to be styled on the superhero mould, such as *Sgt. Rock*, *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*, *The Losers*, *The Unknown Soldier* or *The Haunted Tank*. British comics tended to be about joint efforts.

The first British war comics were launched by Amalgamated Press (A.P.) & Fleetway Library Publications:

*WAR PICTURE LIBRARY* in September 1958 to December 1984

*AIR ACE LIBRARY* in 1960 to 1970

*BATTLE PICTURE LIBRARY* in January 1961 to December 1984.

*WAR AT SEA PICTURE LIBRARY* in 1962 (only lasted to 1963).

*ACTION PICTURE LIBRARY* in 1969 (only lasted to 1970).

In competition, D.C. Thomson launched the then *Commando War Stories in Pictures* in July 1961.



Why, then, was there this proliferation of British war comics from 1958-62? Editor of *Battle Picture Library* Steve Holland stated in 2007:

*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. (p.6)*  
Source: Holland, Steve (General Editor), *Battle Picture Library Collection No.1*, (Crow's Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2007).

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

By the early 1990s, with comic collections promoted as an investment strategy, the range of comics on open sale disappeared almost overnight. Comics became the exclusive preserve of collectors' Comic Book Stores. *Commando* still sold to the older, nostalgic comic buyer, who just wanted a quick read and bought it on the way home, rather than go through the 'Serious Collector' treatment experienced at the small, elitist Comic Book Stores.

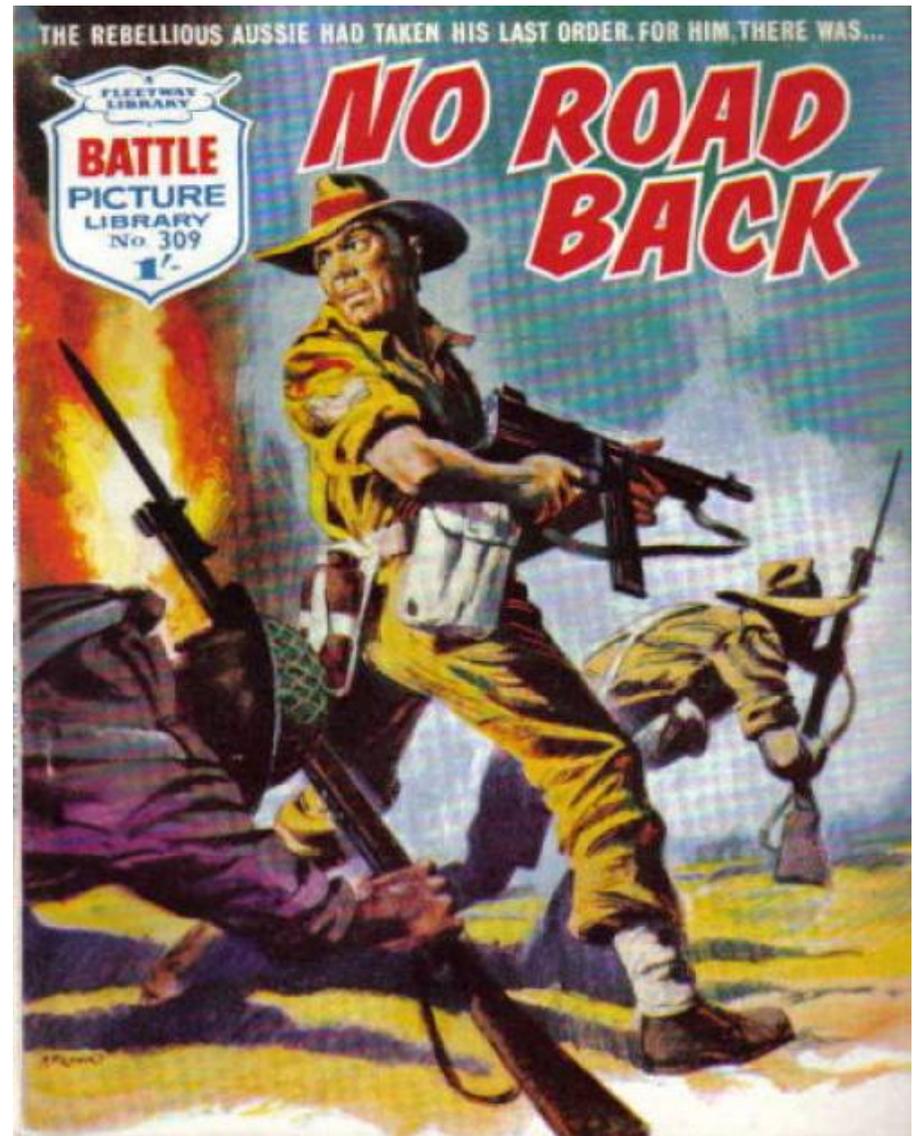


## PHILIP

Unlike the English-based 'Library' comics, *Commando* was produced by Scottish publisher, DC Thomson, which, in the 1930s, pioneered the British comic industry with the printing of *Beano*. *Commando*, with its distinctive shape, glossy, colour covers and distinctive black & white art, 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.

*Commando* comics have had a marked effect on popular culture, especially in the UK, where they provided stylistic inspiration for many punk bands and major players in what was termed the New Wave of British Heavy Metal such as Iron Maiden, Saxon and Manowar. Now printed in Germany to save costs, *Commando*'s sales have fallen severely from a peak of about 800,000 in the 1980s.

However, they remain popular, especially with older readers who have either never stopped reading them or who have rediscovered them. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that the *Commando* readership is not exclusively male.



## The Anzac connection

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 haven't been able to find an 'Anzacland' or 'Anzaclandia' but it appears to be a mythical antipodean realm where Australians and New Zealanders come from. For *Commando*, the use of its 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.*

Source: Low, George (Editor), *Commando For Action and Adventure – ANZACS AT WAR*, (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2007). P 6-7.

### JACK

Indeed the second 1961 issue of *Commando* "They Call Him Coward" featured Australians in New Guinea in 1942. An instant attention-grabber in Australia for this new war comic, it prompted interest and promoted future sales.

### PHILIP

*Commando* is produced in Scotland. So how on earth can we expect a Scot to portray an accurate picture of a New Zealander or an Australian? The answer is that mostly they did not, for while the publishers were Scots, the stories were often written by freelance authors and the artwork was mostly farmed out to South American or European artists who could be employed cheaply. So for the young person growing up on our side of the world, it is likely, that the thrilling tale of daring Australians defeating Rommel single-handedly was written by an Englishman and drawn by an Argentinian!



## The typical Anzac

### JACK

The term ANZAC stands for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. It should only apply to the troops serving at Gallipoli or the Greek Islands in 1915 or in the Greece & Crete Campaign in 1941. The term 'ANZAC' may be a popular label but is inaccurate. For Australians, 'Digger' is the better term.

### So what is the typical *Commando* ANZAC like?

One of the observations about the way that Australians are depicted is that they always seem to be wild colonial boys, losing their shirts, running around in tiny shorts and looking and acting like rugby players! They are disrespectful to their officers, especially Pommys; always stick up for their mates and are often called Bluey or Snowy. They speak in slang that is no longer in common usage and which was dying out even when Phil & I were boys in the 1960s. We are not sure they ever yelled "Crikey cobber, here come the Nips!" but perhaps, because the writers were British veterans, the words were very close to it. The characters are often drawn as quite solid and muscly characters, a long way from the lanky larrikin stereotype of *Bluey and Curly* or by Chips Rafferty in the 1960 film *The Sundowners*.

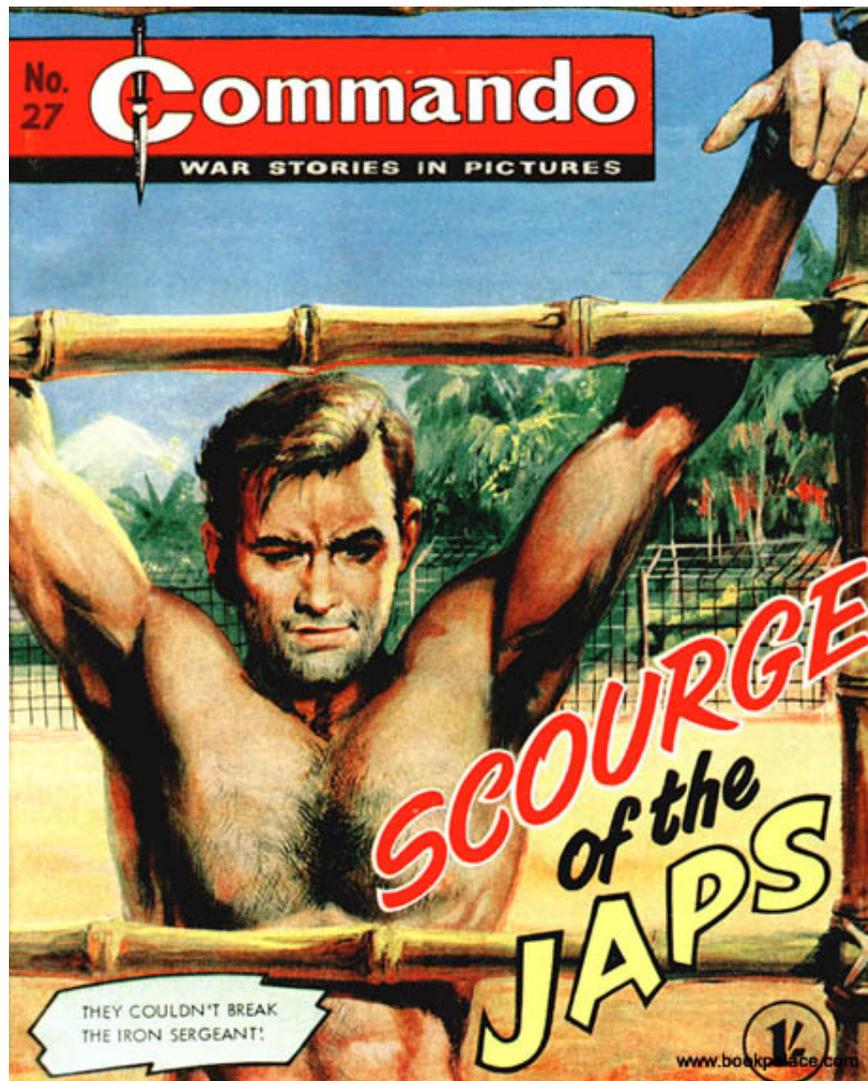
### US

And, of course, in each comic, they ultimately win against the Axis!

### JACK

In many respects these ANZACs are a cliché but I suspect that it is one that we rather like. It is also likely to be closer to the attitudes or behaviour of those, who served in 1939-45, than our own generation. The former editor of *Commando* George Low sums up the use of this cliché thus:

*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.* Source: Low, George (Editor), *Commando For Action and Adventure – ANZACS AT WAR*, (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2007) p.7.



# Antipodean reactions

## ME

So how do antipodean readers react to these stories? Our preliminary data indicates that the *Commando* stereotype is perceived in a similar way to our previous observations. One survey respondent wrote:

*Australians always seemed to be scantily clad compared to their allies. Often they seemed rankless and everyone got on well. Officers were tolerated.*

They were also seen to be anti-authoritarian, individualistic, well-muscled and prone to fighting only in their shorts and tin hat.

Also in *Commando*, readers cannot tell Australians from New Zealanders, unless the Kiwis are wearing a lemon squeezer hat. In fact, it does seem that all the men of 'Anzaclandia' are indistinguishable. Kiwis are just a subset of Australia.

## How do they fare as historical documents?

### JACK

In the 1960s and 70s, schools' History subjects did not investigate the progress of World War II but rather simplified its study down to the 10 Causes of the War. *Commando* 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 (e.g. aircraft cockpit designs), unit identification patches, badges & rank markers, WWII black & white photos, fact quizzes and battle snippets.

Current *Commando* editor Callum Laird:

*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.*



All characters and incidents depicted in the stories in this publication are fictitious and do not refer to any person, living or dead.

## New Zealand war comics

### ME

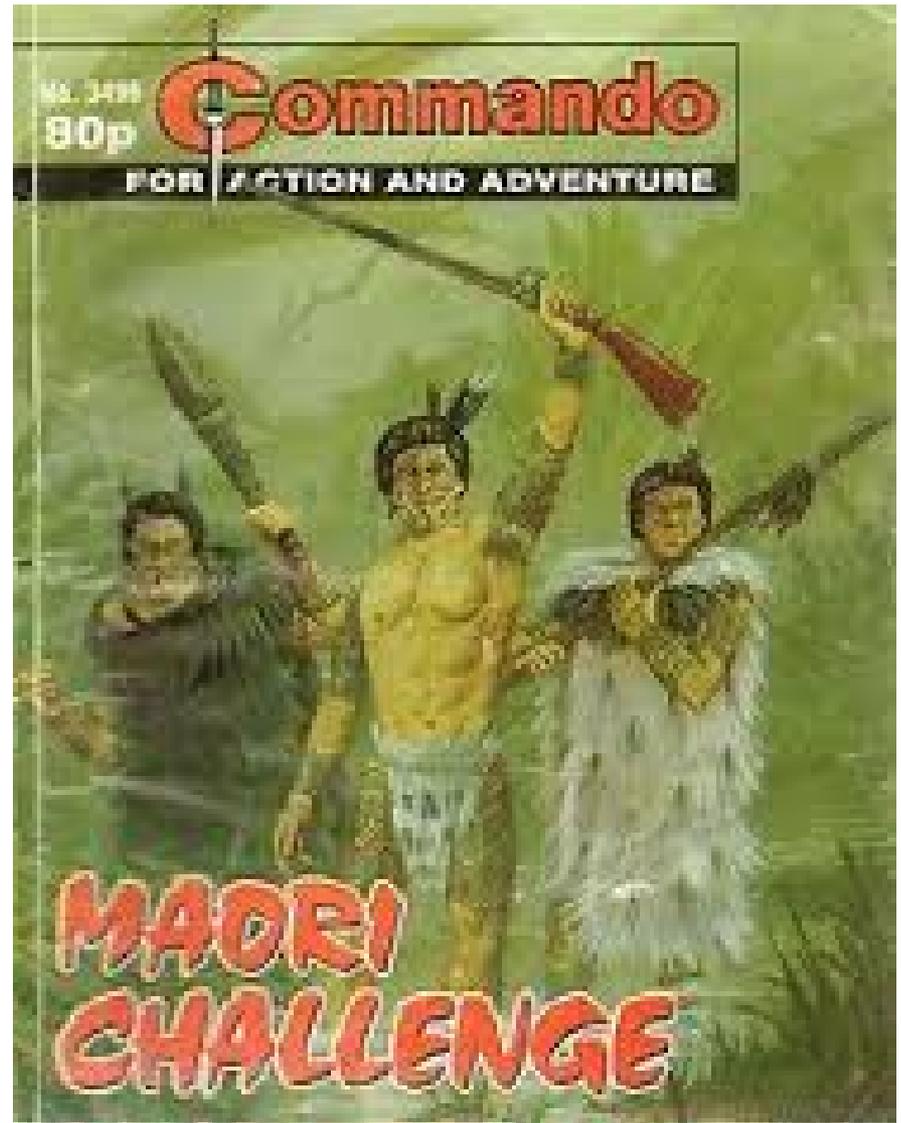
The image at left comes from a page from the only *Commando* comic we could find which deals with the colonial wars in New Zealand.

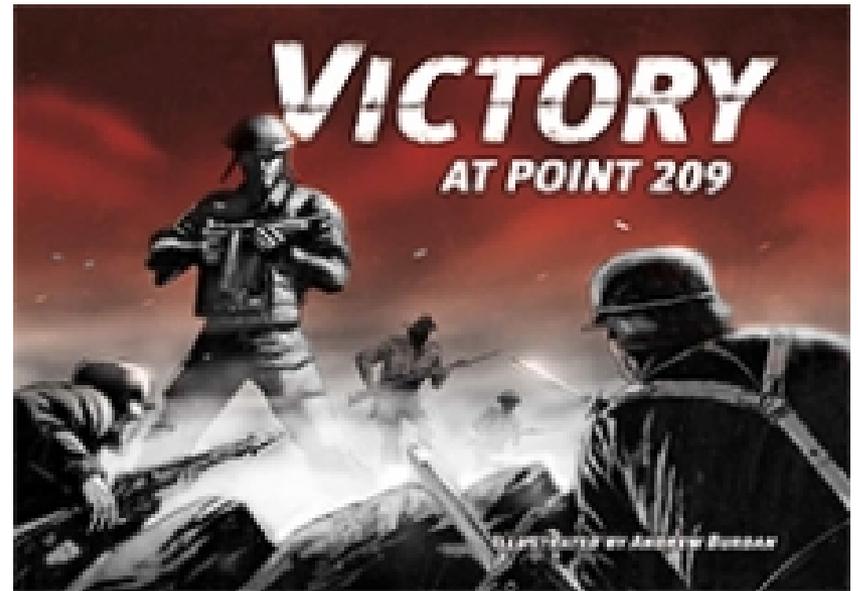
*The Maori Challenge* appeared in 1961. As with other *Commando* comics the artwork was contracted out to an outside artist .

The story presents the war within the parameters often found in *Commando* comics – Maori and pakeha fight, the war ends, Maori and pakeha are reconciled and several generations later their descendants fight side by side against the Nazis.

While there were no locally produced New Zealand war comics during or after the Second World War, there have been a small number of graphic novels in recent years dealing with the experiences of Kiwis at war.

On the next slide are covers for 'Hautipua Rerurangi' (Born to Fly), 'Ngarimu Te Tohu Toa' (Victory at Point 209) and 'A Nice Day for a War.' Significantly, the first two are in Te Reo and are about the achievements of Maori servicemen.





# Conclusion

## ME

*Commando* like other British war comics gave a stereotyped view of our military past. But it served to stimulate the interest of those who were born after the Second World War. As Steve Holland said in 2008:

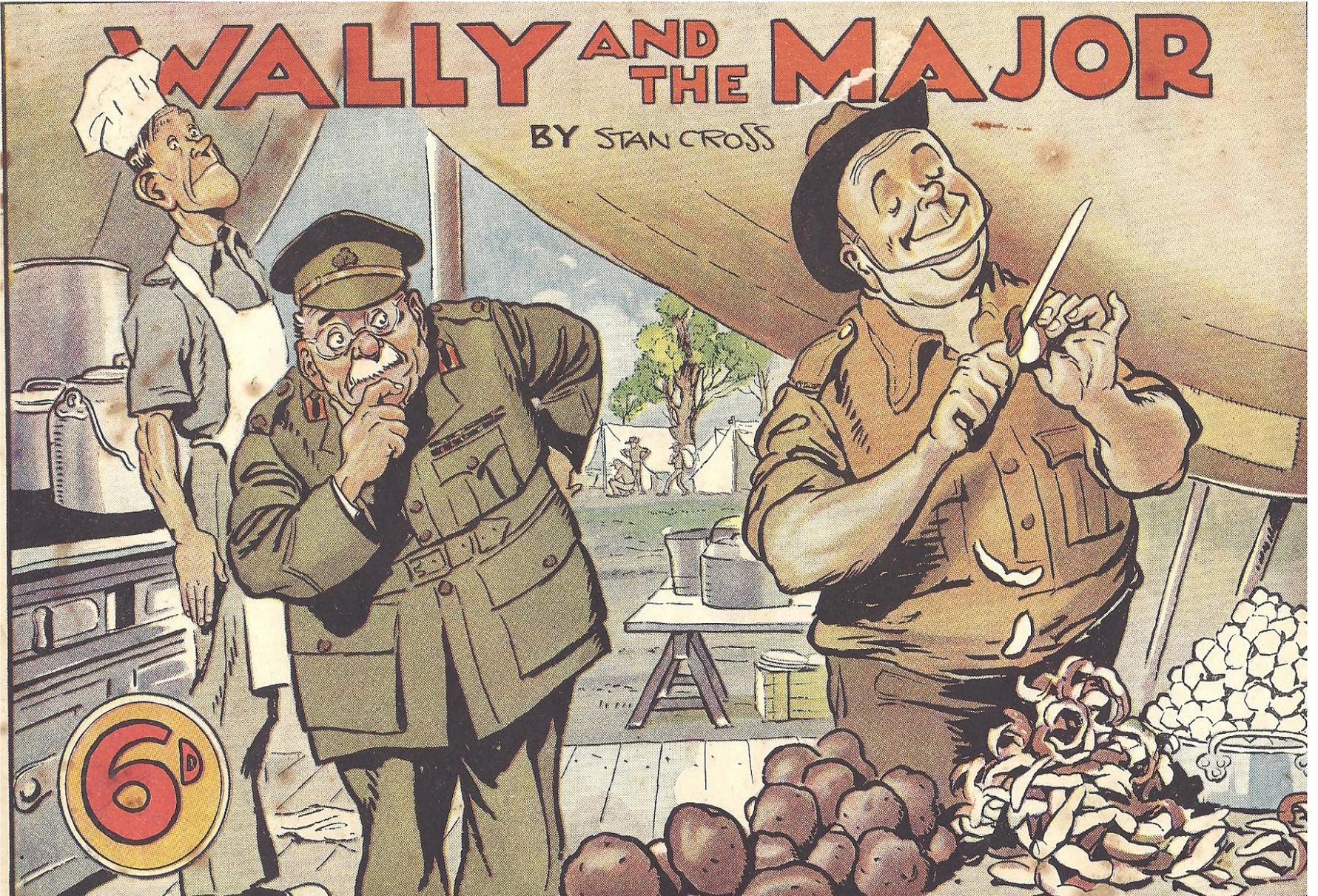
## JACK

*They helped the two generations of children that grew up following V.E. Day make sense of the catastrophic consequences of war and the sacrifices that were made. Fifty years on, they still have the power to thrill and horrify us.*

*Source: Holland, Steve (General Editor), War Picture Library Collection No.2, (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2008).p.7.*

# WALLY AND THE MAJOR

BY STAN CROSS



6

## Commando bibliography

Berry, J., 'The underside of the undershirt: Australian masculine identity and representations of the undershirt in the 'Chesty Bond' comic-strip advertisements,' in *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion*, 1:2, 2014, pp147-159.

Brooker, W., 'Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK, British Library,' in *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, May 1, 2014.

Bourke, J., 'Remembering War,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, XXXIX:4, 2004, pp473-485.

Chapman, J., 'Representation of female war-time bravery in Australia's Wanda the War Girl,' in *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 1:2, 2011, pp. 153-163.

Chapman, J. and Ellin, D., 'Multi-panel comic narratives in Australian First World War trench publications as citizen journalism,' in *Australian Journal of Communication*, XXXIX:3, 2012.

Clarkson, A., 'Virtual Heroes: Boys, Masculinity and Historical Memory in War Comics 1945 - 1995 in *Thymos*, 11:2.

Decker, A., and Castro, M., 'Teaching History with Comic Books: A Case Study of Violence, War, and the Graphic Novel' in *The History Teach*, XLV:2, 2013.

Foster, J., 'From "Ulla Dulla Mogo" to "Serene Azure Vault of Heaven": Literary Style in Australian Children's Comic Books,' in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 1991, XXV:3, pp63-77.

Foster, J., 'A social history of Australia as seen through its children's comic books,' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, XXII:59, 1998.

Foster, J., 'Top of Form  
The Slow Death of a Monochromatic World: The Social History of Australia as Seen through Its Children's Comic Books,' in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 1999, XXXIII:1, pp 139-152.

Gibson, M., 'What you read and where you read it, how you get it, how you keep it: Children, comics and historical cultural practice' in *Popular Narrative Media 1:2* (2008), 151-167.

Ivey, G., 'Hell's battlefield: The Australians in New Guinea in World War I' [Book Review] in *Sabretache*, LIV: 1, 2013.

Johnson, Middleton et al, 'The Relationship Between Children's Preferences for and Knowledge about Other Nations,' in *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, IX:3, [Volume 9, Issue 3](#), September 1970, pp232-240.

Kinnaird, A., *From Earth's End: The Best of New Zealand Comics*, Godwit, Auckland, 2013.

Laird, C., editor, *commando comics*, personal correspondence, September 2014.

Laurie, R., 'Masculinities and war comics,' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, XXIII:60, 1999

Nixon, M., 'Comics and Graphic Novels,' in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, Volume 7: the Twentieth Century and Beyond*.

Ogg, A., 'For you, Tommy, the war is never over,' in *Punk & Post Punk*, 11:3, 2014.

Rech, M., 'Be Part of the Story: A popular geopolitics of war comics aesthetics and Royal Air Force recruitment,' in *Political Geography*, XXXIX, 2014, pp36-47.

Ryan, J., *Panel by Panel: An Illustrated History of Australian Comics*, Cassell. Melbourne, 1979.

Scott, C., "Comics and Conflict: War and Patriotically Themed Comics in American Cultural History From World War I Through the Iraq War," PhD thesis, Loyola University, Chicago, 2011.

Slane, C. and Elliott, M., *Nice Day for a War*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 2011.

## Online sources

Arts and Humanities Research Council  
'New AHRC film looks ahead to the 2014 WW1 commemorations'  
<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News-and-Events/News/Pages/Comics-and-the-World-Wars-A-Cultural-Record.aspx>

British War Comics Forum  
<http://forums.gearboxsoftware.com/showthread.php?t=41745>

Chapman, J., 'Comics and the world Wars: A cultural record'  
<http://www.janechapman.co.uk/page14.htm>

- Commando Comics home page  
<http://www.commandocomics.com/>

Digital Comic Museum  
<http://digitalcomicmuseum.com/>

Gallery of Australian comics  
<http://www.ausreprints.com/content/>

Fleming, R., 'The Art of Commando Comics: National Army Museum' in the *Daily Telegraph*, September 9, 2011.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/uk/london/8749412/The-Art-of-Commando-Comics-National-Army-Museum.html>

Hodge, N., 'Web Comic Artist Redraws Military History'  
<http://www.wired.com/2009/03/kate-beaton-mil/>

Hoyles, A., 'Comics and the world wars: A cultural record'  
<http://comicsforum.org/2014/01/30/comics-and-the-world-wars-a-cultural-record-by-anna-hovles/>

Juddery, M., 'Aussie heroes left to history,' in *Courier Mail*  
<http://archive.today/ANpk3>

'Maurice Bramley'  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice\\_Bramley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Bramley)

McBeth, J., 'Behind enemy lines! Britain's last war comic Commando For Action and Adventure moves printing... to Germany,' *Mail Online*, June 20, 2013.  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2345109/Britains-sole-surviving-war-comic-Commando-printed-Germany-publishers-announce.html#ixzz3774Jsefa>

Panel by Panel transcription  
<http://www.comicoz.com/panel-by-panel.html>

Patrick, Kevin., 'Unmasking the Phantom Commando'  
<http://comicsdownunder.blogspot.com.au/2007/09/unmasking-phantom-commando.html>

'At last...Maurice Bramley'  
<http://comicsdownunder.blogspot.co.nz/2010/12/at-lastmaurice-bramley.html>

Pocket War Comics  
<http://pocketwarcomics.blogspot.co.nz/2011/07/war-picture-library-135-big-arena.html>

State Library of Victoria, 'Heroes and Villains: Australian comics and their creators,'  
<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/120355/20100525-2137/www.slv.vic.gov.au/programs/exhibitions/catalogues/heroesvillains/index.html>

Walters, G., 'Banzai! Eat lead, Fritz! Or why, for Commando comic, the war is NEVER over' *Mail Online*, September 6, 2011.  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2034167/GUY-WALTERS-Banzai-Eat-lead-Fritz-Or-Commando-comic-war-NEVER-over.html>

Z Beach True Comics  
<http://www.zbeach.com.au/>

## Video

*Commando Comics* video  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NaA6u6B0nk>

Comics and the Great War video  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zi4A6IjL00>

*Comics Britannia* episode 1  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wm2OE8j7mD4>

*Comics Britannia* episode 2  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yzjUI2hFM5>