



Ned Kelly's Armour

Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Ask any Melbourne copper what Alphonse Gangitano, Carl Williams and Andrew Venjamin have in common and they'll tell you a vicious gangland war based in Carlton that scandalised Melbourne in the late 90s. Ask your average TV viewer and they'll say they were all part of the hit drama series 'Underbelly'. Big ratings may have turned a bunch of murderous thugs and their wives into overnight celebrities, but I'm guessing that in a hundred years time none of them will be solid gold Aussie icons.

When it comes to heroic criminals, no-one comes within cooee of Australia's very own, Man in the Iron Mask.

His National Treasure is in the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne.

This is Ned Kelly's armour. There's the breastplate, back plate, shoulder guards, skirt, and of course we all recognise that iconic helmet. Ned was a champion of the working class and our most famous bushranger. But what I want to know is just how good was he at designing armour?

Between 1878 and 1880 the Kelly Gang had made a name for themselves in Victoria, robbing banks, killing troopers and taking whole towns hostage. On the night of June 27th they made their final stand in Annie Jones Inn at the famous Siege of Glenrowan.

By dawn the next day the Kelly Gang was finished. Joe Byrne had died in a hail of bullets and the charred bodies of Steve Hart and Ned's brother Dan were pulled from the ashes of the burnt down inn.

Ned, who was badly wounded, was the only survivor. One of the police constables at the siege later swore he overheard Joe saying to Ned, I always said this bloody armour would bring us to grief – which might explain why the siege was the only time they ever wore it.

So where did it all go wrong?

The best place to answer that is in the heart of Kelly country – the national Heritage listed, Glenrowan Historic Precinct. And the best way is to put the armour to the test. This is a lightweight version I prepared earlier. Ned's was made of heavy iron plates and it weighed about 44 kilograms, which is roughly about half his body weight again. On the plus side it could stop bullets, and if you look closely at the original you can see where some of the bullets hit.

And then of course there was the helmet. Now even though Ned wore a thick woolen skull cap inside, it still must have been seriously uncomfortable. But when we take a look at helmet cam, you can see there was another problem. The narrow slit meant that Ned had virtually no peripheral vision. So any troopers off to the side more or less had a free shot. And it didn't take them long to work out what to do. This log marks the exact spot where Ned Kelly fell, shot in the legs. Ned was captured and taken to Melbourne and tried for the murder of three policemen at Stringy Bark Creek two years earlier.

It was no great surprise when he was sentenced to death, but what was amazing was that more than 30,000 people signed the petition demanding clemency.

Shane Carmody is an historian who has written extensively on Ned Kelly. Who was signing the Kelly petition, was it mainly people up in Kelly country?

SHANE CARMODY:

There were people in Kelly country, but there were also people in Melbourne and right across Victoria.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Why did he generate such public support?

SHANE CARMODY:

Well there was a lot of opposition to the police force. It was a particularly corrupt police force and not very adept at their work and Kelly distributed a lot of the money that he robbed from the banks to the people in the north east, so there was a level of support there as well. But then in the city I think it was really the romanticism of Ned which was alive and well at the time and something that was very much part of the Ned Kelly myth, even before he died.

CHRIS TAYLOR:

On November 11th, 1880, Ned Kelly uttered the words, "such is life", and then died at the end of a hangman's noose in Old Melbourne Gaol.

Ned was fiercely proud of his Irish roots, but we've taken him on as an Australian hero because he stood up to authorities and fought for the little guys. Perhaps it's not surprising that a country settled by convicts should turn a criminal into a folk hero.

Australians love a battler – Ned Kelly's suit of armour is a symbol of the underdog and that makes it an ironclad National Treasure.