

Culture TV & radio

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## Our pick free to air: Tuesday April 24

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**Monash and Me: Peter Greste on Australia's Greatest Commander (premiere)**

**Tuesday, ABC, 8.30pm**



Award-winning journalist, author and academic Peter Greste hosts Monash and Me.

Walkley award-winning journalist, author and academic Peter Greste's two-part documentary is, in part, a portrait of an influential innovator and lauded soldier whose strategies revolutionised approaches to battle. But it's also much more. This profile of a multi-faceted man whom Greste describes as "an improbable hero", Jewish civil engineer Sir John Monash, is also a study of two families, an account of Australia's involvement in World War I and an examination of the nature of warfare. It's handsomely assembled and thoughtfully produced, infused by Greste's reflections on memory, identity and combat.

He introduces himself as a journalist who's spent his life "travelling the world, watching wars and trying to make sense of conflict". His name became associated with the struggle for journalistic freedom in 2013 when he was arrested in Egypt on dubious terrorism charges, along with two colleagues from Al Jazeera. They were subjected to a trial that provoked international condemnation and were convicted. Greste was released in 2015.

Like his subject here, Greste has German ancestry and this chronicle of Monash's life is interwoven with the discoveries he made about his own family during the research. Specifically, it follows the fates of the Fankhausers, four great-uncles on his mother's side who all enlisted.

Greste tracks Monash's military career, from his time as a militia volunteer to his departure for war as a colonel commanding 4000 men. He was involved in the Gallipoli campaign and then ordered to the Western Front in Europe, experiencing the mud, blood and carnage of the battle of Passchendaele in Belgium. The first episode also covers the battle at Villers Bretonneux, ending with the adoption of Monash's strategy for what turned out to be the pivotal Hamel offensive.

As he moves through the ranks, assuming responsibility for greater numbers of soldiers, Monash is seen as a dynamic force and an inventive strategist. Not everyone, however, is an admirer and Australia's official war correspondent, Charles Bean, apparently shared his concerns about Monash with the highest levels of government.

In his quest to understand his estimable subject, Greste seeks out the views of a range of experts. A number of soldiers, historians and biographers are interviewed, including Vietnam War platoon commander, former politician and Monash biographer Tim Fischer, battlefield historian Matt McLachlan, military historian and German army veteran Matthias Strohn, and Australia's retired commander of special operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, Paul Burns.

Monash's voice is also heard (or at least conveyed by actor John Howard) as he was a dedicated diarist from his teenage years and Greste is able to draw upon an extensive archive of diaries and letters.

Written and directed by Victoria Midwinter Pitt and shot with a crisp eye by Torstein Dyrting, the documentary asserts itself from the outset with a striking overhead view of Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance.

And it's timely, given Monash's involvement with the construction of the Shrine and the commemoration of Anzac Day, and the fact that his achievements are not as widely recognised as they deserve to be. But in addition to providing an illuminating perspective on a man Greste describes as "full of contradictions, full of complexity", this admirable production contemplates the cost of war and the high price of victory.