

Three Russians in the A.I.F.

by Mike Lucas, Canberra, Australia

Recently, I was re-reading *Jacka V.C.*, the informative and entertaining book by Ian Grant and one anecdote of life in the 1st A.I.F.'s 14th Battalion caught my fancy. Grant is quoting the diary of Lieutenant E. J. Rule, M.C., M.M.

'At one time the 14th Battalion had a Russian born Major named Margolin . . . who came to us from the 16th Battalion. He was Russian and spoke very bad English. All the time he was with us the battalion was in an uproar, and needless to say he never stayed with us . . . Some of the stories told of him are amusing. One day the 14th were resting alongside the road as the 16th came by headed by their band. This band at the time was the best in the Brigade. Suddenly one 14th wit yelled out "Give us your band and we'll give you back your bloody Russian".'

This incident coupled with the amazing events which occurred in 1991, in the former United Soviet Socialist Republic caused me to think about Russians who may have served in other countries armed services and in particular those of my own country, Australia. Obviously, the identity of all such personnel other than a character such as Colonel Margolin, would be difficult to elicit, however, I am aware of three others (I think) just from researching my own humble collection of mainly First War medals to Australians.

Since these items came into my possession and my research revealed the recipients' origins, I have wondered about how they came to be in Australia in the first place. Australia, of course, was a country that attracted its European settlement originally of mainly convicts from England and then more commonly immigrants looking for a new life for themselves and their families. Most of them however, were from United Kingdom countries and it was not until the middle of this century, that large numbers of those of European, Mediterranean and now Asian origin were encouraged to settle here. Russia had its monarchy and although it had its troubles, was generally isolated from the rest of the world, even then. What then were these men from Russia doing here? No doubt they were only three of a number and their occupations (had they been seamen for instance) do not reveal any clue either.

Statistics from the *Australian Encyclopaedia* reveal that of the total of 331,781 men and women who voluntarily enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and embarked from Australia, only 3,137 were 'foreign' born. Of the balance, 257,963 were born in Australia, 64,221 in the United Kingdom, 4,214 in New Zealand and 2,246 born in British countries, illustrating what a homogeneous country Australia then was.

When I first saw the medals to 10551 Tpr/Pte K. C. McClelland, for sale, I was immediately attracted to them because one was the Distinguished Conduct Medal, but the other thing that caught my eye was the rank of Tpr. appearing on the D.C.M., even though the unit was Aust. A.M.C. The abbreviation Tpr., of course, stands for Trooper, the basic rank of the cavalryman and in the case of First World War medals to Australians, Light Horsemen. The remaining medals were named 1/Gen. Hosp. A.I.F.

After obtaining the medals I then commenced research and found that Kenneth Cyril McClelland was in fact the only member on the Nominal Roll of the whole A.I.F. whose name was spelt that way, that is with only one 'L', there being many McClellands.

Upon enlisting in the A.I.F. on 5 May 1915, McClelland was allocated the regimental number 10551 in the special reinforcements group of the 1st General Hospital, Australian Army

Medical Corps. He stated on enlistment that he was 25 years old and born in Moscow, Russia. His occupation was given as farmer of Tresco Estate, Swan Hill, Victoria, while his next of kin was Mrs A. McClelland, of Cowper Gardens, Dublin, Ireland. How could this be—born in Russia of Irish parents? Perhaps, but why the unusual spelling of the surname? So what, easily explainable perhaps, but I believe that McClelland did what many immigrants with obviously foreign names did in Australia in those days, anglicised it, but in doing so, did not utilise the more common spelling of the nearest anglo likeness to his Russian name.

McClelland embarked with his unit from Melbourne on 29 September 1915, and disembarked at Egypt in November that year. There he was apparently detached from the 1st General Hospital group and allocated to the 4th Machine Gun Squadron which was being formed from current serving members and reinforcements to the 4th, 11th and 12th Light Horse Regiments, which made up the 4th L.H. Brigade. He was probably seconded or volunteered to the Medical Section of the unit, because of his previous 'experience/service' in the A.A.M.C.

Little detail of his actual service is known other than between 17 and 19 April 1917, ANZAC Mounted and Imperial units were engaged in the actions referred to as the Second Battle of Gaza. The town of Gaza, Palestine, is situated approximately three miles from the Mediterranean coast and 60 miles south-west of Jerusalem. The capture of Gaza, while a preliminary necessity to the advance up the Philistine Plain, would not immediately achieve far reaching results, but it was the western key to the Gaza-Beersheba line of advance.

McClelland is listed in the recommendations of the 4th L.H. Brigade for this period, as a member of the 4th L.H. Machine Gun Squadron, for the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal. His citation reads as follows:



Trooper K. C. McClelland, D.C.M.,
in Palestine.

AWM Photo. B1191.

'On 19th April during the operations, did splendid work for at least 4 hours under heavy shell and rifle fire in the capacity of AMC orderly. He not only attended the wounded of the unit but also worked with the 11th and 12th regiments, moving from one end of the line to the other. Although wounded early in the engagement he still carried on.'

The Official History records 'that during this day's bitter fighting there were numberless fine instances of individual gallantry. Hour after hour the fearless stretcher-bearers worked in the open with no hope that the enemy could, under such conditions of fighting, respect their humane mission.'

The Second Battle of Gaza was not any more successful than the first and had to be abandoned, such was the strength of the Turkish position. The War Cabinet later referred to it as 'a second Gallipoli'. As with Gallipoli, the advantage lay with the defenders, who had merely to repulse the attackers from behind barbed wire, barricades and trenches.

McClelland's D.C.M. award was promulgated in the *London Gazette* No. 30530 dated 18 February 1918, while he had already been Mentioned in Despatches in *London Gazette* No. 30474 dated 12 January 1918. There is no record as to whether this award was for the same action as his D.C.M. or for one previous to it.

Later in the war, an A.I.F. Official Photographer attended an award presentation day as there are a number of individual portrait type photographs taken of L.H. award recipients, all standing in front of the same stone wall and McClelland is officially identified as one of them. The obviously newly presented ribbon of the D.C.M. is clearly visible on his tunic. The rough uniform and hat of the Light Horsemen says it all and I was particularly interested in McClelland's round Russian or was it really Irish, peasant face.

McClelland returned to Australia on 19 August 1919.

The post-war life of most returned servicemen is usually difficult to ascertain unless they distinguished themselves in civilian life, but I was able to learn from the Department of Veterans Affairs that McClelland died in New Guinea in late 1923. A copy of his death certificate revealed that after returning to Australia, McClelland appears not to have returned to farming but took employment in New Guinea as a Patrol Officer. He had also married, but after surviving three years as a medical orderly in the desert environment, where the enemy were not noted for their reluctance to fire at Red Cross personnel, he succumbed to blackwater fever and died at the relatively young age of 32 years. The death certificate also confirmed his place of birth as being Moscow, Russia, but did not throw any more light on his actual nationality.

I still believe that the official Army identified photograph of his peasant face is the final evidence that he was one of a handful of Russians who served their adopted country Australia in the Great War.

As if to argue my belief that McClelland was one of only a few Russians in the A.I.F., I recently came into the possession of a 1914/14 Star trio to 2879 Pte A. Tarasenkoff, 25th Battalion, A.I.F. Research revealed that Alexander Tarasenkoff joined the A.I.F. on 14 August 1915, where he was allocated to the 6th reinforcements to the 25th Battalion. He was 29 years of age, a miner by occupation, single, of Mount Morgan, Queensland, a copper mining town on the central coastal area of Queensland. In confirmation of my belief, because of his name, that Tarasenkoff was also a Russian, his listed NOK is mother; Mrs M. Paraskoo Tarasankoff, of Selo, Negino, Oril, Russia.

Tarasenkoff embarked with the 25th Battalion on 21 October 1915, but in Egypt, he was redeployed into the 9th Battalion, obviously to fill the ranks of casualties suffered at Gallipoli. He appears to have served with the 9th for the next three years, remaining a private soldier, but being wounded in September/October 1916, and on a second occasion in March/April 1918, with the 9th. He returned to Australia on 12 April 1919. To illustrate the irony of surviving the Great War and returning to an 'easier life' in those times, I have since ascertained that Tarasenkoff drowned in a creek on the north coast of New South Wales in 1936. No other details are available.

Whilst looking up Tarasenkoff I noticed that the number before his in the 25th was allocated to 2878 Pte John Tuagarin, 27 years old, miner, also of Mount Morgan, Qld., who listed

his next of kin as brother, Donald Chicalin, of Glinnoe, Orell, Russia. Both men being miners of Mount Morgan and both being from Russia, as well as enlisting together indicates that they were obviously 'mates' as well as fellow countrymen. The fact that his 'brother's' name is not spelt the same as his own is puzzling as is the similar but different spelling of their home area in Russia—are they the same or different?

Tuagarin similarly was transferred to the 9th Battalion along with Tarasenkoff, but is recorded as being killed in action on 27 December 1916, in France, with the 9th. He is buried in grave I.C.21, Bulls Road Cemetery, Flers, France. No next of kin are recorded with CWGC, nor was an Honour Roll Form submitted. I would suspect that his trio was never issued.

Another interesting item I came across was an entry in one of the volumes of the A.I.F.'s official history, which may or may not relate to Tarasenkoff or Tuagarin, but certainly is coincidental—how many Russians would there have been in the battalion? The official historian is describing the period of 22 to 26 July 1916, when Australian troops were enduring the most sustained artillery bombardment in their history, after capturing the village of Pozieres. '... doubtful whether ... the strain ... was heavier than on the mass of the infantry, who had simply to face the bombardment hour after hour in open trenches. During the bombardment a Russian in the 9th Battalion was working like a terrier on hands and knees, whimpering the while, in desperate anxiety to scrape away the soil from comrades who had been buried. When eventually himself buried and dug out, he ran to the rear'.

I have often wondered what prompted the surviving two men to return to Australia, after the war. Neither appeared to have relatives living here and although the advent of the Russian Revolution must have been known to them, I wonder whether Tarasenkoff attempted to return to his native country or at least visit, before making the long journey back to Australia.

The same with McClelland, although serving in the Middle East, did he attempt to return to Ireland, if his mother was still alive and still living there, or was there no real inclination to do so? Again, there is no indication from service records, so it appears not. Probably, nationals who had left Mother Russia before the Revolution would have been regarded with suspicion, even if their sympathies were not with the Tsarist government before they left.

In contrast with most post-war research into the lives of medal recipients, I believe that I have been very lucky in what I have learned about my two medal recipients. I do not expect to fill any more gaps in their lives—but the search and speculation has been what medal collecting is all about.

The Official Numbering System of The Royal Air Force. Despite all the checks of drafts and proofs, two errors crept into my article on the above (*Miscellany of Honours* No. 9, 1992). Members may wish to amend dates of allocation to two consecutive blocks of numbers as under:

505001-549999—Delete Oct 1939
 Insert Oct 1925
550000-558000—Delete Oct 1925
 Insert Sept 1938

In 30 years of writing for the *Journal*, no article of mine has resulted in such a heavy mailbag. I have been astonished by the interest in the subject and am extremely grateful for the numerous letters of appreciation and helpful additional information.

JIM ROUTLEDGE.