



**The Military Historical Society of Australia
ACT BRANCH**



LE GROGNARD!

February 2011

Committee 2010/2011

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NOTE: This Month's Branch Meeting

**Monday 28th February, 7:30pm
Aegean Room, Hellenic Club, Woden**

Branch News:

The guest speaker for February's Branch meeting will be Alastair Kennedy, a retired British Army Officer, who will speak on the topic of:

"Celestial Diggers" : Chinese-Australians in the 1st AIF.

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Next month's meeting will be on Monday 28 March: further details in due course. Please advise if you would like to give a presentation during 2011, or have a suggested guest speaker in mind.

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MHSA Biennial Conference 2012:

I hope you've taken note that the ACT Branch will be hosting the Society's next conference. Dates have now been set: the conference will be held over the weekend Saturday/Sunday 3-4 November 2012. That might seem a long way off, but planning is underway now - suggestions are welcome; offers to assist, more so.

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Noticed, in the Australia Day Honours announcements [AO military division Australian Army]:

Major-General Aziz Gregory Melick AM RFD - for distinguished service as Commander 8th Brigade. Head of Reserve and Employer Support Division, and as Head of Cadet, Reserve, and Employer Support Division, Australian Defence Force.

Greg is a foundation member of the recently formed Tasmanian Branch of the Society.

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University of the Third Age [U3A]:

Now in its fourth year, the **ASPECTS OF MILITARY HISTORY** course that I convene for the U3A is underway again - Thursdays, 2.30-4.30pm at the Canberra Southern Cross Club Jamison. I remind Branch members that they are most welcome to attend sessions of this course. Please contact me if you want to know more.

Ian Stagoll

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The 521 Fallen Australians - Vietnam Research by Barry Hampson

Researcher Barry Hampson is carrying out research for proposed book on the 521 Australians who died in the Vietnam War, to be called **The 521**. The book intends to tell the individual story of each of the 521, plus how their death effected and continues to affect their families, friends and the mates they served with, which also needs to be recorded.

To assist in the endeavour, the author would like to talk to and interview anyone who served with any of the 521 Australians; this includes members of their families and friends. Barry Hampson can be contacted directly at bazz662@bigpond.com or via the contact page on his webpage www.barryhampson.com or via mobile on 0424 750 943.

Croydon Library – Military History Group

The Croydon Library, in Victoria, is the base for a group entitled the Eastern Regional Libraries Military History Group. The library publishes a free, on-line newsletter, entitled 'On Parade'. The newsletter can be subscribed to at militarynews-subscribe@erl.vic.gov.au.

Military Quote of the Month

'Hard pressed on my right. My center is yielding. Impossible to maneuver. Situation excellent. I am attacking.'

Ferdinand Foch (at the Battle of the Marne)

The Russo-German Legion

Here is an interesting twist on the creation of the German enlistment of Russian POW to fight for the Reich during World War Two – the Russo-German Legion, which was created by the Russians in September 1812 from German POWs. The Legion consisted of two brigades of Infantry, two Hussar regiments and two batteries of Horse Artillery. Prussian officers were already part of the Legion by 1813 and in 1814 the Legion's *Jägerbattalion* was raised from members of the East Prussian *Jägerbattalion*. By the time it was fighting on the lower Elbe and The Netherlands in 1814 it was part of Walmoden's Corps, however, in October 1814 it was incorporated into the Prussian Army as Infantry Regiments No. 30 and 31. It fought at Ligny and Wavre in the 1815 campaign.

The uniforms were entirely Russian, dark green with red cuffs and turnbacks for both regiments. The collar of the 1st Regiment was red and that of the 2nd Regiment blue. The Russian shako or '*Kiwer*' was worn with white cords. Grey trousers with red stripes were worn in winter and white linen ones in summer. The *Jäger* wore a black brush plume on the front of the *Kiwer*. As in the case of the Berg troops, the former Russo-German Legion regiments did not receive Prussian uniforms until after the Waterloo campaign.

Custer's Battle Flag sells for 2.2 million Dollars

After spending much of the last century in storage, the only US flag not captured or lost during Custer's Last Stand at the Battle of Little Bighorn sold at auction on Friday for US\$2.2 million. The buyer was identified by the New York auction house Sotheby's as an American private collector. Frayed, torn, and with possible bloodstains, the flag from one of America's hallmark military engagements had been valued before its sale at up to US\$5 million. The 7th US Cavalry flag or guidon had been the property of the Detroit Institute of Arts. The museum paid just US\$54 for it in 1895.

Bad Luck or Bad Training?

Operation *Wiking* ('Viking') was a sortie into the North Sea by the *Kriegsmarine*'s 1st Destroyer Flotilla in February 1940. During the operation, poor inter-service communication and cooperation between the *Kriegsmarine* and the *Luftwaffe*, coupled with inexperience, resulted in the loss of two German ships through friendly fire bombing and German mines. No Allied forces were involved. The force of six German destroyers set out on the moonlit night of 22 February 1940 to intercept British fishing boats off the Dogger Bank. Although the *Kriegsmarine* had been informed that the *Luftwaffe* intended to fly anti-shipping operations in the North Sea that night, the message had not been passed on to the task group. As the German force made their way through the narrow swept channel of their own minefield the destroyer Z1 *Leberecht Maas* was bombed by a Heinkel III; in two attacks she was hit three times. In the following minutes there was confusion in the remaining five destroyers, who had

apparently not seen the second attack by the aircraft. In the confined area of the swept channel they faced considerable dangers from their own mines as they tried to rescue the crew of the stricken Z1 from the freezing cold waters. The situation was then compounded by the belief that they were under torpedo attack. The Z6 *Theodor Riedel* interpreted hydrophone sounds as a submarine but she was travelling too slowly when she dropped her depth charges and she damaged her own hull and steering. The Z3 *Max Schulz* was then blown up in another large explosion.

The Z13 *Erich Koellner*, Z16 *Friedrich Eckoldt* and Z4 *Richard Beitzen* put out their boats to pick up survivors. However, just as they reached the men in the water, another submarine was believed sighted and they were ordered away from the rescue at speed. The small boat was still attached to the stern of the *Erich Koellner* with a rescue party in it, as the destroyer sped off this boat capsized and they were all lost. Ultimately there were no survivors from the *Max Schulz*, unable to survive in the icy waters whilst the other ships spent twenty-five minutes looking for a submarine, and only sixty from the *Leberecht Maas*. In total 578 men were lost.

Meanwhile the *Luftwaffe* were reporting that they had bombed a single ship some 50km away, and were querying a teleprinter request from the *Kriegsmarine* to provide a dawn escort for a **returning** task force, since they were not aware of any German ships in the area in the first place. It was to take some time before the subsequent German enquiry was able to piece together what had happened.

The True Story of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*

The generally disappointing 2001 film *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, basically a tragic love triangle played out against the background of the Axis occupation of the Greek island of Cephalonia, is based on the 1994 novel *Corelli's Mandolin* by Louis de Bernières. One of the most important events of the novel is the massacre of surrendered Italian troops by the Germans in September 1943, following the fall of Mussolini. While the novel gives a far more realistic account of the tragedy, the movie failed to portray the enormity of the crime, showing just a couple of dozen Italian soldiers being executed. In reality, following the surrender Italian Army's 33rd Acqui Mountain Division, who had fought a bitter battle against invading German forces between 15 and 22 September 1943, only surrendering when their ammunition was exhausted, Hitler issued a special *Führer-befehl* or Führer order, that all Italian soldiers who had fought on Cephalonia, except for Fascists, those of German birth, doctors and chaplains, were to be executed. Out of 12,000 or so Italian troops on Cephalonia, 1,250 died in the fighting against the Germans, 1,000 managed to escape and join Greek partisan units, 4,000 who had surrendered without fighting (probably mostly members of the division's 27th MVSN ('Blackshirt') Legion, although there is speculation that the blackshirt units had actually been withdrawn from the island by the time of the massacre) or who were indentified in the exempt groups were spared and around 5,000 (Father Romualdo Formato recorded 4,750 names) were shot without trial. The 4,000 prisoners were also doomed to die; in October 1943 the men were locked into the holds of three ships and, supposedly despatched to Greece. However, the three ships all mysteriously 'struck mines' as soon as they had left port; locked below the Italian prisoners had little chance of escape, the few who did manage to break out were machine gunned in the water by the Germans and it is believed that not a man survived. The Cephalonia massacre was the subject of a highly successful cover up, with the German commander, General Hubert Lanz, claiming at his war crimes tribunal that he had not carried out the *Führer-befehl* at all and that his written report to Army Group E that 5,000 members of the Acqui Division had been 'treated in accordance with the Führer's orders', i.e. shot, was

faked in order to cover up the fact that he had not carried out the order. Lanz's claims were accepted by the War Crimes Tribunal and he received a light sentence, 12 years, of which he served three, and then went on to have a successful post-war life in Germany until his death in 1982. Incredibly, and without checking on its veracity, the Tribunal also accepted the totally false claim that the Italian commander on Cephalonia had not received orders from the new government in Rome to resist the Germans and that therefore he and his officers (whom Lanz did admit to executing, but only by sentence of lawful court martial) were mutineers and '*francs tireurs*' and thus not entitled to protection under the Geneva Conventions. Eye witness accounts by surviving Italians, former German soldiers and Greek civilians and partisans, however, totally discredit Lanz's claims. In particular, Father Romualdo Formato, regimental chaplain of the 17th Acqui Infantry Regiment and one of the survivors, spent years after the event collecting evidence and was responsible for identifying the 25 execution sites used by the Germans.

Freedom of the City

On 14 March 1946 the US Army's 14th Major Port Command was granted "The privilege, honour, and distinction of marching through the streets of the Town and County of Southampton with bayonets fixed, drums beating, and colours flying," in recognition of the unit's extraordinary management of that southern English port. (INTREP Comment: Not sure if this is the only instance of a US Army unit being granted the Freedom of the City by a UK community – anyone out there in INTREP Land know the answer?)

Youngest Indian VC

The youngest Indian soldier to be awarded a VC during World War II was 19-year old Sepoy Kamal Ram (3/8th Punjabis). Sepoy Kamal Ram was awarded the VC for actions on 13 May 1944, during the Allied breakout from the Cassino line in Italy – it was his first day in combat.

Field Medicine

In 1537, French army surgeon Ambroise Pare, the "Father of Military Medicine," observed that gunshot wounds healed faster when treated with salve than when they were cauterized with hot oil, and that amputees had a better chance of survival if exposed blood vessels were tied off. Oddly enough, archaeological evidence shows that the latter had been a standard Roman Army field medical practice but by 1537 had fallen out of favour for 1,000 years.

Tom Custer's 'Baubles'

Tom Custer, younger brother of the more famous George Armstrong Custer, was the very first American serviceman to be awarded the Medal of Honor twice. His first award was for action near Namozine Church, Virginia on 3 April 1865 and his second was for action at Saylor's Creek, Virginia on 6 April 1865 - three days apart. Although the recommending officer for both awards had been Tom Custer's older brother George, thereafter, whenever Tom showed up at an event wearing the medals, George referred to them, some say with envy, as his 'baubles'.

MYTH BUSTING 101

The Only All Volunteer Army?

One of the great myths connected with the Australian Army is the belief that the AIF was the only all volunteer force during World War One. All members are almost certainly aware of this claim and doubtless many believe it. The myth, however, is just that, a myth. The Indian Army, which was not a part of the British Army and which operated under its own legislative mandate (*The Indian Army Act*) and was not subject to the British *Army Act*, was an all volunteer force, conscription never being resorted to India during the British Raj. At the other end of the extreme, tiny Newfoundland, today a province of Canada but in 1914 an independent dominion in its own right, managed to put a single battalion sized unit into the field, the 1st Newfoundland Regiment (later Royal Newfoundland Regiment) and this unit remained an all volunteer force until the end of the war. So there!

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Anyone who has an interest in the study and research of military history, customs, traditions, dress, arms, equipment, medals, and kindred matters, is most welcome to attend meetings of the ACT Branch of the Society. For membership or other enquiries contact the ACT Branch Secretary, PO Box 7139, Watson ACT 2602, or visit the Society's website: www.mhsa.org.au.