

Cultural diversity in the Australian Imperial Force

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During the First World War, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) – the military formation that the country sent to the war – reflected Australia's ethnic make-up. Most of the more than 420,000 men who volunteered were of British origin, but just as men of other nationalities could be found across the country, so too could they be found in the AIF. They brought their own accents, cultures and habits to a predominantly Anglo-Saxon force and, being mostly European, blended in. But some groups stood out, none more so than Indigenous Australians.

They were precluded from entering military service under the *Commonwealth Defence Act*, and most recruiters early in the the war stuck to the principle outlined in the *Recruiting Regulations Booklet*: 'Aborigines and half castes are not to be enlisted. This restriction is to be interpreted as applying to all coloured men.' But over the years of war indigenous men were accepted into the AIF and in 1917 the rules preventing them from enlisting were relaxed as the need for reinforcements became acute.

Hundreds and perhaps several thousand Indigenous Australians enlisted and in the Army many found themselves, for the only time in their lives, free from the discrimination that attended their every day civilian lives. In 1919 a Queensland nurse observed that there was 'no discrimination on the battlefield and certainly none in the military hospitals.' More than a decade after the war, another veteran wrote of 'a Queensland aborigine' who had 'become his brother, and was his brother still.'

Also banned from enlisting for not being of substantially European origin or descent, were Asian Australians. The country had been home to Chinese people since the gold rushes of the mid-nineteenth century and more than 500 Australians of Chinese heritage, perhaps many more, served in the AIF during the war. One, Billy Sing, the son of a Chinese father and English mother, earned a measure of fame as the AIF's most deadly sniper of the Gallipoli campaign. He returned to Australia with his Scottish wife in August 1918, a decorated and much respected soldier.

With one European parent, Sing and other men of Chinese or Asian heritage were able to get around race restrictions and enlist. One of the AIF's most skilled scouts, Harry Freame, was born and raised in Japan by his Japanese mother and Australian father. He came home to Australia in 1916 having been wounded and wearing the ribbon of the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Caleb (Charlie) Shang another highly respected scout, the child of a European mother and Chinese father, was twice awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and also the Military Medal. After the war his daughter wondered whether this modest man held back from seeking a commission because he worried that soldiers under his command would not like 'taking orders from a coloured man.'

Shang was a member of the 47th Battalion, a formation no different in its make-up to others in the AIF. He appears to have been its only soldier of Asian heritage, most of its members were of British background, in this case from Queensland's rural districts and regional towns. But also included in its ranks were men like Lauritz Hagen from Aalborg in Denmark, Konrad Karelson, a Norwegian sailor, the Italian, Angelo Silva, and Nicholas Lagutin from Moscow.

Lagutin was one of at least 1,000 Russians in the AIF. Lieutenant Colonel Eliazar Margolin, the Force's highest ranking Russian soldier, served in the 16th Battalion on Gallipoli and went on to become its commander. More typical, by virtue of his having served in the ranks was Yacob, a private described by his friend Edward Lynch, author of one of the AIF's greatest memoirs, *Somme Mud* as a 'Russian Jew ... (who) deserted a ship to enlist'. Yacob, said Lynch 'used to run to oil and Russian lingo when excited.'

Yacob, Margolin and Lagutin were all natives of an Allied country, but the AIF also counted Germans in its ranks. Australia was home to some 34,000 German born people during the pre-war years. Many other Australians had parents or grandparents of German background. South Australian Edward Mattner, from a well-known German Australian family, enlisted in September 1915 and returned from the war one of just five members of the AIF to have been awarded the Military Cross, the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Military Medal. But his proud record of service did not prevent his mother, a woman of English background, suffering discrimination and doubts about her loyalty during the war years.

Edward Mattner enlisted under his own name. Other Germans anglicised theirs or changed them completely in an understandable attempt to hide their origins. Thus did Heinrich Otto Zink become Frank Raynor, the name by which he was known in the AIF until his death at Villers-Bretonneux. Leopold Augustein took the name Leo Austen and his two brothers shared this new surname when they enlisted. All three served in France. Leo gained a commission and was wounded at Pozières.

Men whose families came from allied or neutral countries had less reason to change their surname, and so their origins can often be surmised from a glance at their service record. Henry Claude Cicognani, who spent much of the war in German captivity having been captured at Mouquet Farm in 1916, was from a small town near Gulgong in New South Wales. It seems reasonable to suggest that somewhere in his background was an Italian ancestor. When he contacted the Department of Defence in 1942, Cicognani had adopted a slightly more anglicised version of his name, signing a statutory Declaration as Henry Cicognani Chick. Leo Emile Wroblewski could surely trace his ancestry to central or Eastern Europe, perhaps Germany or Poland. Seemingly unsure of what this name signified, an officer scribbled on the first page of Wroblewski's attestation papers that he had 'no objection on the score of nationality' to his enlisting. Like Zink/Raynor, Wroblewski was killed at Villers-Bretonneux in 1918.

Mostly the AIF's non-British soldiers were like these men, ordinary soldiers who, apart from their background, did not stand out. Sometimes though a man whose name marked him as a foreigner attained the British Empire's highest award for valour and became one of a very select band. Jøergen Jensen, a Dane who had come to Australia in 1909, received the Victoria Cross for his part in the fighting at Noreuil in 1917. Once a man was in the AIF, his background mattered far less than his willingness to accept the dangers and hardships of the soldier's life.

As Sydney man Joe Maxwell VC wrote after the war, 'When Digger meets Digger the memory goes jogging back to the Peninsula or the mud and blood and mad ruin of northern France. We talk war, we live war once again.' When returned men reminisced, few worried about where he or his parents were born. The AIF was a brotherhood that admitted men from diverse backgrounds. Their bond, born of the most intense experience, transcended ethnicity.