

HMAS SWAN IN RUSSIA

Allied support for the White forces during the Civil War that followed the Russian Revolution was a complex and ultimately unsuccessful undertaking, in which Australians were involved in a variety of roles across different regions. Although limited in scale, operations by Royal Australian Navy vessels in 1918–1919 contributed to supporting Interventionist and White Russian forces in the Black Sea and on the Crimean front in the face of renewed Bolshevik pressure. The most notable example of Australian involvement in this context was the mission of HMAS *Swan* to the Black Sea at the end of 1918.

Ukraine had been recognised as an independent state by the signatories of the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) in March 1918 and was immediately occupied by German and Austro-Hungarian forces. The only area not under occupation was an eastern strip of the country held by the Don and Kuban Cossacks. Following the [Armistice in November 1918](#), the Central Powers withdrew from the occupied territories, leaving a vacuum that the Bolsheviks were quick to exploit. This exposed the flank of the Cossack positions to Red Army advances.

Both the Cossacks and the newly formed Volunteer Army under [General Denikin](#) were keen to see this gap filled. Denikin had been negotiating for Allied intervention in the region for some time. However, such intervention never materialised in the desired form. Moreover, disagreements between Denikin and Ataman Krasnov over the integration of Cossack forces into the Volunteer Army further complicated the situation. As a result, neither side was able or willing to secure the exposed territory. The Allies, who supported Denikin, attempted to mediate the dispute by sending a low-ranking delegation to the Don region to assess the true condition of the Cossack forces. HMAS *Swan* and the French destroyer *Bisson* were assigned to this mission.



Миноносец Swan

HMAS *Swan* had been laid down at the Commonwealth Naval Dockyard on Cockatoo Island on 22 January 1915 and launched on 11 December the same year by Lady Creswell. The ship was a River-class destroyer of 700 tons, with a complement of 72. Its main armament consisted of one 4-inch gun, three 12-pounder guns, and three 18-inch torpedo tubes. *Swan* initially served as part of the British blockade force in the Far East. She was based at Sandakan, Borneo, in late 1916 alongside HMAS *Torrens* and HMAS *Huon*, and remained on Malayan patrol duties until June 1917. In July, she joined the Australian Destroyer Flotilla under Commander W. H. Warren,

RN, and undertook anti-submarine operations in the Mediterranean. At the time of the Cossack mission, *Swan* was part of the 5th Destroyer Flotilla under the command of Commander Arthur Bond, RN.



Arthur Bond (center) and his officers in Adriatic

The two destroyers reached Kerch, on the Sea of Azov, in the first week of December 1918. They found the White forces there to be poorly organised. In his report, Bond noted that although the Allied mission was enthusiastically received by the local population, he considered it unlikely that the Volunteer Army in the region would 'ever play any significant role in the anti-Bolshevik campaign.' The mission's orders, issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied squadron, were to report on conditions in Mariupol, Taganrog, and surrounding areas, about which little reliable information was available. A Russian admiral, Kononov, and a Russian army officer were attached as interpreters.

Leaving Kerch, the destroyers crossed the shallow waters of the Sea of Azov to Mariupol, where the mission was again warmly received. Bond inspected the local garrison and steelworks, after which preparations were made for an inland journey. In addition to Bond and the French Capitaine de Corvette Cochin, the delegation included Engineer Lieutenant Commander George Bloomfield, Lieutenant J. G. Boyd, and Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant D. Munro, who served as secretary. Six naval ratings also accompanied the party: Petty Officers Neal and Swinden, and seamen Bouchier, Robinson, Rostron, and White. The French contingent was similarly composed. Two Cossack colonels and General Svetchin, a former staff officer to the Tsar, also joined the mission.

Travelling by train on 8 December, the group briefly inspected Rostov before proceeding to Novochoerkassk, the capital of the Don Republic, where they met General [Pyotr Krasnov](#), Ataman of the Don Cossacks. The entire garrison of the Don Cossack regiment lined the streets upon their arrival. The delegation attended a religious service at the cathedral alongside the Ataman and local clergy, followed by a series of official receptions and social events.

In his report, Bond described one such event:

In the evening, an official dinner was held at the Ataman's residence, where prominent representatives of the Don and Kuban regions delivered speeches outlining their aims for the regeneration of Russia. As throughout the mission, it was necessary in reply to express sympathy with the regiments fighting against the Bolsheviks, while making it clear that we were observers only and not authorised to state any Allied policy.

Despite this, local leaders clearly interpreted the mission as a sign of impending Allied military support. Bond repeatedly had to emphasise their limited role. The same situation arose the following day at a banquet hosted by the Krug, the Cossack assembly. The delegation inspected cavalry schools and training establishments and met with various local representatives. The officers later toured the front line by motorcar and military railway, while the enlisted personnel remained behind. After inspecting forces at Kantemirovka and Buturlinovka, and attending another religious service, the delegation reached Talovaya, where they observed heavy artillery in action. It was claimed that 60,000 Cossacks were holding back a Bolshevik force of 720,000—figures likely exaggerated, but indicative of the pressure they faced. A planned visit to Bobrov had to be abandoned due to a local Red Army breakthrough, forcing a rapid withdrawal.

Bond observed that the Cossacks were heavily reliant on captured ammunition and artillery, often obtained during cavalry charges. He noted: 'Several commanding officers on this front informed me that their Cossacks were extremely fatigued, and that the presence of Allied officers gave them renewed morale.'

The mission then returned south, inspecting a newly established shell factory at Taganrog. Bond subsequently decided to proceed to Ekaterinodar to submit the military intelligence he had gathered to [General Poole](#), head of the British Military Mission supporting General Denikin. Poole's eventual success in persuading Krasnov to unite his forces with Denikin's Volunteer Army in January 1919 may well have been influenced, at least in part, by the information provided by the officers of HMAS *Swan*, as it highlighted the untenable position of the Cossacks without material support from the Allied-backed Volunteer Army.

The historian Peter Kenez, author of *Civil War in Russia*, has suggested that the mission was overly impressed by the lavish reception it received, and that its favourable report did not significantly influence Poole's determination to subordinate the Cossacks to Denikin. However, having examined Bond's report—which Kenez did not consult—I would argue that although Bond clearly expressed sympathy for the White cause, he was by no means blind to the weaknesses and limitations of the Cossack forces. Upon the mission's departure, Ataman Krasnov decorated its members. Bond was awarded the Order of St Vladimir, 4th Class with Swords, while the other officers received the Order of St Anne, 2nd Class. The ratings were each awarded the Medal of the Order of St Anne.

The two ships then proceeded to Sevastopol, where their guns were used to help defend the railway station at the head of the Inkerman Valley. Bond's report was subsequently forwarded to the British Foreign Office. On 3 January 1919, the Australian Flotilla sailed for Plymouth. HMAS *Swan* returned to Sydney on 21 May 1919.

In addition to *Swan*, HMAS *Yarra* and HMAS *Torrens* also operated in the Black Sea region, becoming the first destroyers to take up station at Novorossiysk and Batumi. HMAS *Parramatta* carried dispatches and mail between Constantinople and Sevastopol from the time of the Turkish surrender until early January 1919. She also escorted a group of Russian warships that were transferred to anti-Bolshevik forces at Sevastopol in late November 1918. These operations appear to have been conducted without significant incident.

The British Military Mission remained in southern Russia throughout 1919 and was evacuated only in March 1920, after Denikin's forces were defeated by a Red Army offensive and the collapse of the White cause became inevitable.

Extracts from the notes of Captain Arthur Bond, commander of HMAS Swan, describing the Allied mission in southern Russia, late 1918:

A dreadnought lay capsized at her moorings, while a destroyer behind her appeared to have been driven halfway up a cliff, with only her stern still in the water. I was told by a Russian officer that, during the Bolshevik uprising in the fleet, the captain had deliberately run his ship ashore at full speed to prevent it from falling into Bolshevik hands. A recently completed dreadnought, Volya, lay in the harbour apparently undamaged, but little else seemed seaworthy. One of my duties was to inspect and report on various gunboats, destroyers, and smaller craft. The first vessel I boarded was a destroyer. Although her hull was largely intact, the interior was a scene of utter devastation. Her captain, who was living aboard with only a few men, showed me around. It appeared as though explosives had detonated across every part of the ship. This officer also gave a vivid account of the Bolshevik mutiny in the fleet and took me aboard a large depot hulk, where he showed me a bloodstained deck. He and many other officers had been taken there by a drunken and violent mob of mutinous sailors. He described how the massacre began immediately—officers were shot and cut down in a chaotic, writhing mass. He and, he believed, only one other officer survived. He attributed his survival to a senior petty officer among the mutineers who spared him, as he had been a popular captain among his men. He was left wounded among the bodies of his comrades until he managed to crawl into a small boat and escape ashore under cover of darkness.

On the morning of 4 December, I was summoned by the Commander-in-Chief and instructed to prepare to proceed into the Sea of Azov, accompanied by the French destroyer Bisson, commanded by Capitaine de Corvette Jean Cochin, a most capable and agreeable officer with whom I had previously served in the Adriatic. My orders were to proceed to Mariupol to assess and report on the military, civil, and economic conditions in the Don region. I was given considerable discretion in carrying out this task. I was also instructed to take with me Admiral Kononov of the Russian Navy, one of the most courteous gentlemen I have ever met. Additionally, I secured the services of Mr de Hahn, a former officer of the Russian Army and a Cambridge graduate, whose assistance proved invaluable throughout the mission.



Bisson destroyer

Swan and Bisson departed Sevastopol on the morning of 5 December and reached the entrance to the Kerch Strait at first light on 6 December. At Kerch, we found suitable berthing and were

soon visited by representatives of the local authorities, the Volunteer Army, and various civic organizations, who welcomed us as representatives of the 'saviours of Russia.' Within hours, proclamations of welcome in Russian, English, and French were posted throughout the town. That evening, a reception was held at the town hall, where we were welcomed by M. Back, a former Minister of Finance under the Emperor. He delivered a powerful speech on Russia's plight. In my reply, I outlined the purpose of our mission and appealed for full cooperation in achieving its objectives.

We departed Kerch in a heavy snowstorm on the morning of 6 December, taking two local pilots aboard, and set course for the buoy marking the entrance to the Gulf of Taganrog. We reached Mariupol the following morning and moored alongside the quay. There, we were met by General Svetchin (Michael Svechin, 1876-1969), representing Ataman Krasnov, who delivered an invitation for us to visit Novochoerkassk and to tour the region with the Ataman, including an inspection of the Don Cossack front opposing the Bolshevik forces.

As this appeared to be an excellent opportunity to obtain the information we required, I readily accepted, though I limited the proposed tour to visits to the principal towns and the active front. A joint civil and military banquet was held at noon, after which we inspected the port facilities. At midnight, Capitaine Cochin and I departed Mariupol by train, accompanied by the following officers and men, who, by special invitation of the Ataman, remained as guests of the Government at Novochoerkassk:

- Lieutenant Commander G. W. Bloomfield, RAN (to report on machinery)
- Lieutenant J. G. Boyd, RANR
- Paymaster Sub-Lieutenant D. Munro, RAN (to act as secretary)
- Chief Stoker A. White
- Engine Room Artificer E. A. Robinson
- Petty Officer J. A. Neal
- Petty Officer A. L. Swinden (to remain at the Novochoerkassk wireless station and maintain communication with the ship)
- Officer's Steward W. Rostron (to attend to officers)
- Officer's Steward E. L. Bouchier (as my personal servant)

Equivalent personnel were detailed from Bisson. Several stops were made along the route, where we were greeted with formal addresses of welcome at various stations.

Upon arrival at Novochoerkassk, the mission was received by a large guard of honour from the St George's Cossack Regiment. I had previously been advised of the custom of saluting the guard with the Russian equivalent of "Greetings, Cossacks!", to which the entire formation responds in unison. We then proceeded in open carriages to the cathedral, passing through what appeared to be the entire population of the city. Continuous cheering accompanied us, and flowers were thrown into our carriages. A mounted escort rode ahead of and behind the procession. At the cathedral, we were presented to His Excellency the Ataman, after which a solemn and impressive service was conducted by the Archbishop with full ceremonial of the Russian Orthodox Church.



The Swan destroyer crew and Russian guests onboard of it

At 6 p.m., a formal banquet was hosted by the Ataman, attended by more than two hundred guests. General Krasnov delivered a lengthy address outlining the situation in Russia as a whole and in the Don region in particular, concluding with an appeal for immediate Allied assistance. A toast was then proposed to the health and prosperity of the Allies, which was drunk standing. In my reply, I explained the purpose of our mission and stressed the importance of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the situation. I noted that any potential assistance—and its form—would depend largely on the quality of the information gathered by our mission and others like it. We could only express admiration for the sacrifices made by Russia while fighting alongside us, and our deep sympathy for those now struggling against chaos. A toast 'to a new and united Russia' was drunk in silence. At the Ataman's request, I asked for the Russian national anthem to be played. It was received with profound emotion—the Archbishop and many others stood with tears in their eyes. I was later told that this may have been the first time it had been played in Russia since the Revolution. On the many occasions when I was required to speak, my remarks were followed by equally measured responses from Capitaine Cochin. Despite the cautious and noncommittal position we were obliged to maintain, our statements were generally received with great enthusiasm. Fortunately, both of us had made efforts to study the situation thoroughly while in Sevastopol, and this knowledge proved invaluable.

Capitaine Cochin and I were accommodated at the Central Hotel, while the other officers and men were lodged elsewhere in the city. The following day, St George's Day, began with another ceremonial service at the cathedral. Immediately afterward, we returned to the hotel and began a series of interviews with individuals able to provide useful information. Throughout our stay, these interviews were conducted daily, often continuing late into the night and sometimes even during train journeys. The schedule was exhausting, particularly as early starts were routine in order to keep to the programme.



After the ceremony in the Cathedral. Bond is the fifth in the 1st row

We interviewed individuals from all walks of life - from senior generals to Bolshevik prisoners—and were given complete freedom to summon anyone we believed could assist us. That evening (9 December), a banquet was held by the President and members of the Krug (the Cossack parliament), at which speeches similar in tone to those of the previous evening were delivered.

However, tensions were evident. The President of the Krug (Cossack Assembly) was suspected by many officers of holding views at odds with those of the Ataman and his supporters, and the atmosphere was somewhat strained. My French colleague and I had decided to test the situation deliberately. In my reply, I emphasized the necessity of unified command among the Allies as a prerequisite for success. The effect was immediate. The Ataman, seated beside me, gave what I interpreted as a snort of disapproval, confirming our impression that he was not entirely sympathetic to certain figures associated with the Allied-backed Volunteer Army. Heated arguments soon broke out between Cossack officers and members of the Krug; in one instance, a military officer angrily shook his fist in the face of a civilian delegate.

I seized the first opportunity to calm the situation and proposed a toast to the health and prosperity of Russia, adding: 'Today is St George's Day. St George is also the patron saint of England... May this bring our countries closer together.' Fortunately, this was received with great enthusiasm. Many of those present came forward to clink glasses, after which a representative of the Volunteer Army delivered a passionate speech, and order was restored. However, we were soon escorted away, the Ataman remarking that the proceedings might otherwise become overly heated. We then attended the local theatre, where we were presented with bouquets by the leading actress. After the performance, we returned to our ongoing series of interviews.

The following day was devoted entirely to visiting military establishments and closely examining the impressive military organization General Krasnov had built from the remnants of the province after the Bolshevik occupation. This force had been formed on the basis of a 'schoolboy army' that had originally helped retake Novochoerkassk. The average age of the soldiers appeared to be about seventeen, and we even saw children - some no older than ten - drilling with cadet units. That evening, we dined privately with the Ataman and later attended a reception hosted by the Military Club. Delegations continued to arrive until midnight, when the mission, accompanied by the Ataman and his staff, departed by train for Kantemirovka, en route to the front.

We arrived at 8:30 a.m. and were received by a guard of honour. There, we met General Ivanov, a distinguished officer with whom I had a lengthy discussion. Despite his advanced age, he expressed his readiness to serve under any younger commander devoted to Russia's cause. He provided a detailed account of the situation on his sector of the front and outlined the assistance required for success. The Ataman and I, accompanied by Chief of Staff General Denisov, travelled in one motorcar, while Capitaine Cochin and other staff officers followed in another. We set off across the bleak, frozen steppe, stopping for lunch at Boguchar, where we learned that Cossack forces had captured Korotoyak along with a significant quantity of munitions—an invaluable gain for an army largely dependent on captured supplies. We then pressed on through a blinding snowstorm, losing our way several times in the vast, featureless landscape. Eventually, we encountered a Cossack patrol, which escorted us onward. The journey was harsh and desolate. The cold in the open car was intense, despite heavy goatskin coats and felt boots. The few dwellings we passed were almost buried in snow, some accessible only by tunnels dug to their doors. It seemed as though we would travel endlessly through the darkness, illuminated only by our lamps. The Ataman sat upright beside me, snow accumulating along the collar of his greatcoat, when at last we saw, far ahead, the beam of a searchlight pointing into the sky. It was our destination. Near midnight, we reached Kalach, guided by rows of withered sunflower stalks marking the road. There, at headquarters, we examined the latest positions on the staff maps before retiring for a meal and rest in the home where we were billeted. A scene from that evening remains vivid in my memory. The news from the front had not been good. Our host—a tall, bearded man—sat silently at the head of the table. Around him, Cossack officers spoke in low voices, their expressions grave.

Over the next four days, we visited Buturlinovka and Talovaya on the northern front. General Gouselshchikov informed me that his troops were under severe pressure, but that the mere presence of Allied officers gave them hope and renewed determination. At that time, the front was relatively quiet due to the extreme cold. However, when we attempted to reach Bobrov further along the line, a sudden Bolshevik attack broke through the Cossack positions and threatened the railway behind us. In response, a regiment of St George's Cavalry - fewer than 400 men - as assembled in the town square. After a rousing speech by the Ataman, they rode out and, using cold steel, cleared the route, capturing over thirty field guns and enabling our return to Buturlinovka.

On this front, approximately 60,000 Cossacks were holding back a force of some 720,000 Bolsheviks, relying largely on ammunition captured in cavalry actions and with minimal artillery support. At my request, we visited a hospital a few miles behind the lines. Every inch of floor space was occupied by beds and makeshift bedding. Due to overcrowding, maternity cases were housed alongside the severely wounded. The surgeon in charge told me he had almost no anaesthetics or disinfectants. The windows could not be opened because of the cold, and the stench was overwhelming. Shortly after our visit, the front line was pushed back past the hospital. One can only imagine the fate of those left behind.

During our time at the front, we gained a clear understanding of the situation and the army's needs from the commanding officers. It is tragic to reflect that this courageous force was soon overwhelmed by the advancing tide of Bolshevism, from which so few escaped. After the long return journey—this time in clear weather—we arrived again at Kalach, collected the remaining members of our party, and departed the following morning for Taganrog. There, we spent a day inspecting munitions factories established by General Krasnoff and assessing their requirements, after which we dined with the officers of the Garrison, who were ardent supporters of the Royalist regime, and showed us the regimental ikons presented by the late Emperor as well as many photographs taken while he and his family were visiting the regiment. Hearing that General Pool of the British Military Mission was at Ekaterinodar with General Denikin (the right spelling is Denikin), I suggested to the Ataman that it seemed desirable to discuss the information that we had gathered with him. General Krasnoff put a special train at my disposal to cover the 250 miles journey, and I left that night, accompanied by General de Svitchen who intended to make an appeal for help from General Denikin.

At Ekaterinodar I met General Poole and had an interview with General Denikin during which I endeavoured to stress the necessity for immediate help for the Don Cossack forces. This interview confirmed the opinion Capitaine Cochin and I had formed, that there was little sympathy between General Denikin and General Krasnoff. The French Military Mission was also at Ekaterinodar, and attached to it was a certain individual called Erhlich who had attached himself to us in Don, and whom we had requested the Ataman to have removed from the train, as he did his best to influence us against General Krasnoff in every way. He stated that he was a French Diplomat but the stories we heard about his past did not give us any confidence in his remarks. It was evident that the French in particular would hear of no one but Denikin, and considered that we had done damage to his cause by our mission to the Don.

In view of later events, it is interesting to me to read again, as I have just done, my long report which was forwarded to the Foreign Office, and which states that the definite impression was received that if General Denikin was placed at the head of the white forces he would not have the confidence and full support of the Cossacks or the Don who at that time formed the backbone of the anti-Bolshevik resistance. The report was largely a resume of the opinions gathered from many of the most celebrated Generals of the Russian Army, and reading the later history of the futile struggle to save the country under General Denikin's leadership, it must strike the reader how halfhearted and unfortunate was the campaign which lost the Allies so much prestige not only in Russia but in other countries.

Having left our information with the British Military Mission, returned that night to Novotcherkassk, to pick up the officers and men and bid farewell to the Ataman before leaving the country. Before bidding us farewell in the train, the Ataman presented decorations.

I should like to put one possibly minor fact on record. For the first few days it seemed to me that the French portion of the visiting officers and men were received with more enthusiasm than the British section, but, by the time I picked up the parties which had been entertained at Novocherkassk, I noticed a striking difference. I was congratulated by the Ataman, and in fact on all sides, on the admirable behaviour and bearing of the officers and men of the Swan. Some Military officers would hardly believe that Chief Stoker White, who as senior Petty Officer had replied to many toasts, was not a Commissioned Officer, and the great popularity they had achieved among their hosts was expressed to me on every side.

While travelling, we stopped at any station of importance, to get out and receive deputations of welcome with gifts of bread and salt on illuminated trays. The platforms were always crowded whatever time of the day and night it might be, and, as each stop meant leaving the warm carriage for the bitter cold outside, ready with a suitable reply for each kind of deputation, the procedure became very exhausting. On one occasion, while an English-speaking girl pupil of an educational establishment was in the middle of reciting an address, she collapsed into my arms in a fit of nervous hysteria.

As we got out of the province of the Don into that of Voronish (correct spelling – Voronezh), over which the line of the fighting front swayed backwards and forwards, a great difference in the attitude of the Civil population was most noticeable. The crowds we passed through maintained an atmosphere of apathy or of passive antagonism. Great precautions were taken to see that we did not linger among them longer than was necessary, and at intervals shots rang out close at hand. General Krasnoff explained to me that shooting birds was a pastime of his soldiery, but on one occasion the whistle of a bullet and a spurt of snow a few yards on the far side of our conveyance, followed by the sudden departure of a section of the escort and some more shots, gave an indication of the precarious hold the Cossack forces had on the district which had just fallen into their hands.

The mission was intensely interesting, and left us with a feeling of the greatest compassion for the splendid and loyal officers and men who were, as it turned out, to be so soon engulfed by the second wave of Bolshevism which swept over the province of the Don.

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<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/arthur-george-hayes-bond>