

AUSTRALIANS IN THE RANKS OF THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE IN THE RUSSIAN NORTH

Soon after revolutionary Russia withdrew from the First World War, Great Britain sent a military mission of 560 personnel to the Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel. Its aim was to train White Army troops and to ensure that large quantities of military equipment previously delivered to supply the Tsar's army did not fall into German hands.

The mission that landed in Archangel was formed on a voluntary basis and consisted of British servicemen and personnel from the dominions. It included six Australians—three officers and three sergeants. A subsequent, larger force, which arrived in early 1918, comprised British, Canadian, and American battalions, along with smaller units from the French, Polish, Serbian, and Italian armies. Several Australian volunteers were attached to the so-called *Elope* unit, which landed in Murmansk. Later, British troops, including several Australians, were transferred to Archangel, while the Syren mission remained in Murmansk.

In August–September, Allied forces began advancing westward toward Lake Onega and southward along the Vologda railway. White Army units remained in the rear of the advancing forces. The Red Army offered little resistance, as the Bolshevik command did not initially consider this front of the Civil War a priority. On 11 November 1918, Germany capitulated. The onset of the northern winter halted the Allied advance; nevertheless, they were continually engaged by counterattacking Red Army units. At this stage, most Australians served as advisers to White Army formations.

Meanwhile, the governments of the Allied countries concluded that their forces should be withdrawn from Russia, fearing escalation of what had become an increasingly unpopular conflict. However, in the spring, news arrived in the north of successes achieved by White armies in southern and eastern Russia. It was therefore decided to reinforce the Allied contingent in support of a renewed southward advance intended to link up with Admiral Kolchak's forces. Evacuation of the expeditionary force was to follow thereafter.

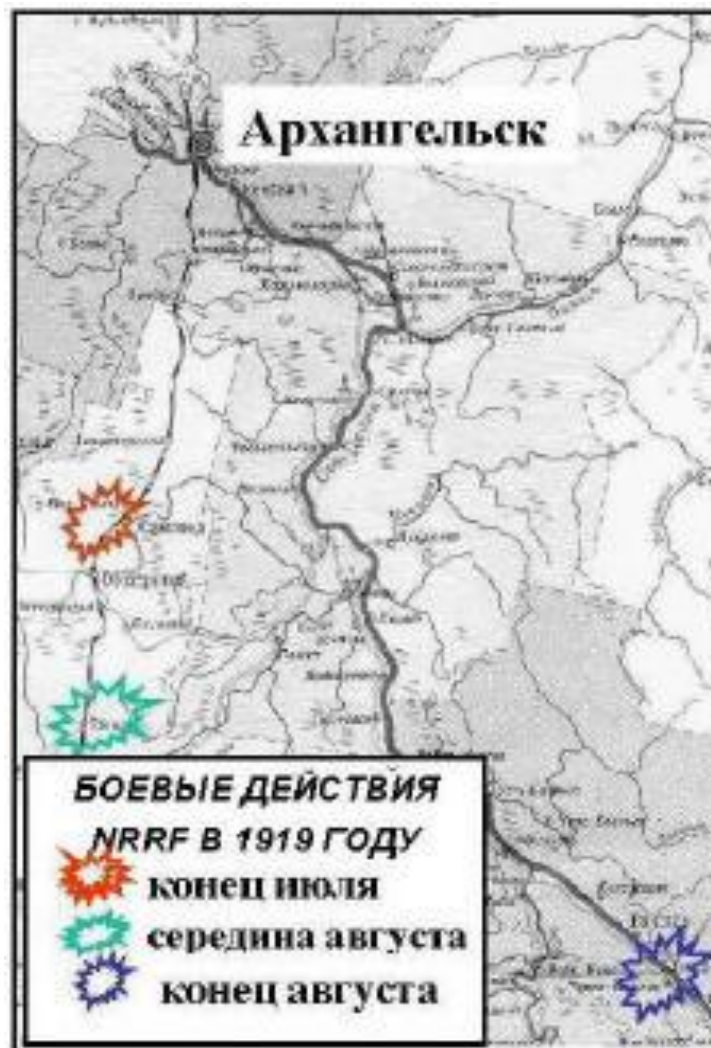
The reinforced formation, known as the North Russia Relief Force (NRRF), was to consist of two brigades under the command of Generals [George Grogan](#) and [Lionel Sadlier-Jackson](#). As before, the force was formed on a voluntary basis. One of the early volunteers, Major [Harry Harcourt](#), was aware that many Australian soldiers remained in England awaiting repatriation. In addition, Warrant Officer Charles Oliver - an Englishman who had emigrated to Australia in 1910 and served in the Australian Imperial Force—actively assisted in recruiting Australians. In total, about 150 Australians enlisted in the NRRF. They were assigned primarily to the 45th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers and the 21st Machine Gun Battalion of Sadlier-Jackson's brigade. Oliver succeeded in organizing the Australians into separate companies and obtained permission for them to wear their national uniform.

It is noteworthy that Australian officers were not guaranteed retention of their rank within the NRRF, which led at least one decorated volunteer, a Victoria Cross recipient, to withdraw his application. Another officer, Lieutenant Gipps, found himself reduced to the rank of corporal upon joining the force.

What explains the considerable enthusiasm among Australians for this enlistment campaign? Some had arrived in England too late to see combat and wished to gain battlefield experience before returning home. Others, despite having already distinguished themselves in earlier engagements, were eager for further service. Among them were veterans of Gallipoli, such as

Sergeant Robinson and Private Francis; veterans of [Ypres](#), including Corporal [Samuel Pearse](#); as well as Private Spies and NCO Jenkin, who had distinguished themselves in France in 1918.

In June–July 1919, over a period of four weeks, Sadler-Jackson's brigade was transported to Archangel. Several companies were immediately dispatched along the Northern Dvina to the village of Bereznik, near the front line, to relieve units previously stationed there. The Allies held the line alongside a White Army battalion. On 7 July 1919, one of its companies mutinied and defected to the Red side, killing several officers, including British personnel. The mutiny had a strongly negative impact on General [Edmund Ironside](#), who lost confidence in the White forces and increasingly supported the idea of a rapid withdrawal of Allied troops from Russia.



Places of combat activities of NRRF (red - end of July, green - middle of August, blue - end of August)

Meanwhile, the Royal Fusiliers Battalion and the 201st Machine Gun Battalion, which included many Australians, arrived in Archangel under the command of Major Harcourt. On 16 July, Harcourt received orders to strengthen positions along the railway line stretching westward toward Onega, as British command had received intelligence of an impending Red Army offensive. This offensive was expected to be accompanied by uprisings among the local population and within White Army units; accordingly, the Allied forces were also required to perform policing functions.

The British units successfully carried out their task: unreliable, pro-Bolshevik troops were disbanded and disarmed, and replaced by British, Australian, and loyal White Army units.

Private Robinson later recalled this period of his service: "Our role in this area was mainly to patrol the clearings in the vast pine forests and to attack the Bolsheviks wherever they attempted to establish positions. One such position - a large machine-gun post - was attacked by us, and a number of the enemy were killed. The Bolsheviks did not bother to bury their dead, leaving them to rot where they lay. There were no casualties on our side."

On 20 July, Russian troops suddenly mutinied along the Onega River. An Australian, Captain Brown*, was among the few British officers present at the center of events. He managed to shoot two mutineers, but was then himself killed—shot and bayoneted.

On 22 July, Bolshevik forces began their advance along the railway, capturing six machine-gun block posts. However, their subsequent attacks on Harcourt's positions were halted during the night. By morning, after a series of counterattacks, British forces had recaptured all previously lost positions. Later that day, a patrol encountered a Red detachment of approximately 300 men preparing for a counterattack. A company composed largely of Australians launched a sudden assault, inflicting heavy losses and routing the enemy, while suffering no casualties themselves.

Within a week, further skirmishes took place, with White Army units fighting alongside British forces. An Australian detachment was ordered to capture a Bolshevik artillery piece located on a railway siding. The attack was successful: numerous trophies were taken, along with around 200 prisoners.

With the railway sector secured, General Edmund Ironside turned his attention to operations along the Northern Dvina. Bolshevik forces, numbering around 6,000 men, had established defensive positions on both banks of the river. These positions were well fortified, with machine-gun posts and barbed wire defenses. General Sadler-Jackson's brigade—comprising two battalions of Royal Fusiliers, two machine-gun companies, an engineer company, and a White Army brigade—was assigned to advance, supported by 22 artillery guns.



Corporal [Arthur Sullivan](#) - one of two Australians in the ranks of NRRF who was awarded with a VC. A white star on his sleeve - a NRRF insignia



Sergeant Pearce awarded with a VC posthumously

On 10 August, following an artillery barrage that included smoke and mustard gas shells, Allied forces rapidly captured the villages of Chudinovka, Kochimaka, and Sludka. An Australian soldier, Private Brooke, distinguished himself in the fighting and was later awarded with the Distinguished Service Medal. Shortly afterward, the Allies also seized the villages of Borok and Gorodok. However, toward the end of the day, a Red Army counterattack forced them to withdraw from Sludka.

Corporal Sullivan distinguished himself during this retreat. His platoon, acting as a rearguard, was forced to withdraw across the swampy banks of the Dvina. An officer and three soldiers began to drown, and Sullivan, noticing their plight, immediately plunged into the swamp and rescued all four. For his bravery, he was awarded the Victoria Cross. (A detailed account of this battle can be found in the memoirs of another participant, Ernest Heathcote.)

On 11 August, General [Henry Rawlinson](#) arrived in Archangel to replace Edmund Ironside and oversee the evacuation of Allied forces. He spoke highly of the recent Allied offensive, noting that it had weakened Bolshevik capabilities to the extent that they would be unable to disrupt a safe withdrawal.

Before the evacuation, however, Australian troops took part in one final engagement near the village of Emtsa, located along the railway line. The Allied attack was intended to strengthen White Army positions ahead of the British departure. On 29 August, a combined Allied and White detachment launched a surprise assault on Red positions, but encountered determined resistance. During the attack, Sergeant Samuel George Pearse cut a passage through the barbed wire and then destroyed an enemy block post with hand grenades. Minutes later, he was killed by a burst of machine-gun fire (an episode witnessed by Private Robinson). Pearse was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions. Another Australian, Sergeant Hill, was severely wounded in the same battle and lost a leg. Private Robinson was also wounded; a Bible he carried in his breast pocket stopped a bullet and saved his life.

By the end of the engagement, the Bolsheviks had retreated across the Emtsa River after blowing up a railway bridge. The Allies captured approximately 1,000 prisoners.



The Australians of the 201st machine-gun battalion before the attack on Emtsa



A Bolshevik's block post. Sergeant Pearse lost his life attacking it

During the following four weeks, the Allies handed over all positions captured from the Bolsheviks to the White forces and withdrew to Archangel. Before departing, they destroyed large stockpiles of military equipment accumulated in the port, apparently anticipating that the city would soon fall to the Bolsheviks. Within four days, by 27 September, all British troops had been evacuated from Archangel.



Red POWs captured by Australians

The Australians who served in the North Russia Relief Force (NRRF) returned to England, where they joined approximately 8,000 of their countrymen awaiting repatriation. They managed to take with them two captured Maxim machine guns, which were later sent to Australia for display in a military museum (one of them is still exhibited at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra).

The participation of Australians in the war in northern Russia attracted little attention at home and even provoked some critical commentary in the press. In subsequent years, this episode was largely omitted from histories of the Australian Army. Only recently has it received limited recognition, with a brief account appearing in a military encyclopedia.

What, then, was the outcome of this story? Two Australians — Captain Brown and Sergeant Samuel George Pearse—were killed, while several others were wounded, including Sergeant Hill and Privates Kevin, Purdue, Robinson, Lutherborow, and Gaffey. Both Victoria Crosses awarded during this campaign went to Australians, one of them posthumously. Eight Australians received the Distinguished Service Medal. The commander of many of the Australian troops, Major Harcourt, was also decorated. In 1929, he emigrated to Australia and later served in New Guinea during the Second World War.

The Allied expedition ultimately did little to support the White cause. It merely delayed the fall of Archangel by several months and did not significantly influence the course of the Civil War. Moreover, the association of the White forces with foreign intervention strengthened Bolshevik patriotic propaganda. The campaign cost Great Britain approximately £15 million (in 1919 prices) and added another blemish to the reputation of its chief advocate, Winston Churchill, whose strategy in this instance proved unsuccessful.

♣ *Captain Allan Brown was born in Manchester, Great Britain. He served for three years in the Duke of Lancaster's Yeomanry before emigrating to Australia at the age of 21. On 25 August 1914, he voluntarily enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force. He served in Egypt, was wounded in the leg at Gallipoli, and returned to action before the evacuation. He later fought on the Western Front in France, was wounded at [Messines](#), and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He volunteered for the NRRF; his letters to his sister suggest that one of his motivations was*

financial, as his personal belongings—including valuables—had been lost when a ship bound for Australia was sunk by a German U-boat.

The Forgotten War in North Russia. Defense War Journal No 22, May-June 1980

A Pathetic Sideshow. Australians and the Russian Intervention. Journal of the Australian War Memorial. No 7, October (1985)