

MIRACULOUSLY SURVIVED



You are about to read memoirs of a private Ernest John Clinton Heathcote, native of the Town of Bellingen, NSW. He volunteered to the AIF on the 15 July 1918 at an age of 19, willing to fight for "The King and The Country". He had not chanced to see the Western front, and in spring 1919 he joined the NRRF. He took part in fierce battles in August 1919 and miraculously survived, having been wounded several times. Reading of his notes, written in 1920, does not leave any doubts that fighting between the Red Army troops and the British was exceptionally ferocious with heavy losses on both sides. In this connections some statements of historians that the foreign intervention in Russia was an insignificant episode of the Civil war can cause only an ironic smile. Anyway,

read and make your own judgement.

It was in the middle of April [1919] that the British Government called for volunteers for the North Russian relief force to relieve the men who had been out in Russia during the winter and who were being pushed into the sea - so they said at the War Office but we have since learned the reason for this North Russia relief Force. Our camp at Longbridge. On Salisbury plains was invaded one morning by an Imperial Army officer belonging to one of the Guards regiments. He had insignias on his tunic in the shape of a white five pointed star on a blue background. We were naturally curious and we soon got the wind that he was giving a picture on the North Russian situation in the canteen at twelve thirty. As you may expect the whole camp turned up to the lecture and he explained to us that he had been sent down to the Australian camps by the War Office to recruit volunteers to join the North Russia relief Force. He was "howled down" by the diggers and told to "go home". It was painful scene - especially for the officer - but it was only a humorous interlude in a monotonous routine of the diggers.

A good deal of discussions was carried on by the diggers and at that time there was a lot of unrest on account of the time the Australian authorities were taking to get us back home and we were all fed up with being in camp doing nothing. We all wondered if there would be any volunteers who would go to North Russia as members of the Imperial Army. There were some two hundred volunteers and by the end of the following month an Australian Machine Gun Section was formed.

The Australian section was welcomed in Archangel on the 30th June but of their doings I do not speak, except to say that they proved themselves and upheld the name that Australian troops had made in France, - as I was not with them. The reason for my absence from the section was that on the 9th June a Colonial section of the M.G.B. (Machine Gun Battalion) was wanted to go at once. Four of us Australians volunteered to go and the remainder of the section comprised of South Africans and Canadians. We disembarked at Archangel on the morning of the 20th June after a pleasant voyage through the ice fields in the North sea. There the 45th Royal Fusiliers, among which there were thirty Australians, were sent up the River Dvina to Pinega - a village on the River Pinega - a big tributary of the Dvina. They were sent from there to Ossinovaya - a small village three hundred miles up the Dvina River from Archangel so you can understand that the troops we were going to relieve were far from being "pushed into the sea" as was asserted by the English authorities and papers.

Ossiniovaya was the main base of the forces both English and Russian acting on the Dvina front. Here us Machine Gunners joined the 201st Machine Gun Battalion and we were put through some drill there which was simply monotonous to us Aussies and we soon learnt the meaning of the word discipline. We felt like mutinying but as there were only a couple of us we had to stick it. We were surprised at the quantity of materials which the British Government had on this front. Bereznyk, a village on the opposite side of the river to Ossinovaya was an airplane and seaplane base and in the river lay three big monitors.

It is well known that the sun shines day and night during part of the year in Russia and the weather is very warm. As a consequence we did our drill during the night and slept during the heat of the day. One morning at one o'clock we turned out in full force to meet the famous "[Dyer](#) battalion" which consisted of ex-Bolsheviks who had been taken prisoner the preceding winter and who had volunteered to fight for the loyal Russians against their ex-comrades. They were fitted with British uniforms and rifles and equipment and were under the command of [captain Royce Coleman Dyer](#).

One day during a lull in the fighting on the left bank of the Rive Dvina we were back in billets having a bit of a rest after the stint on the preceding day. I was not on a picket and happened to be playing a game of Whist with some of my mates, others were playing nap and poker and the lucky ones who possessed writing paper were writing home or to the "girl in Blighty". I happened to glance through the door of the billet to the place known as "Company H.Q." and I saw our section officer and several other officers and the colonel holding a confab together. One of the boys remarked on this and said he'd bet a weeks pay that we would be moving up into the line gain in a few days. We soon got news that a voluntary patrol of twenty five was to be sent out under the direction of an officer of another platoon. The sergeant came along for volunteers and somebody said: "Who's in charge?" - "The officer in N5 platoon," the sergeant replied. "Nothing doing," said our friend. Shut the door as you go out, sergeant and tell him to go and get some [YMCA](#) recruits as there is nobody here anxious to pass in their checks but some of those Bible bangers might like a trip up above".

How this particular officer was known to be a very breezy chap - not in the way a person is known as breezy - but one who would get the breeze up if a 9.2 had landed on the front line and wondered if they would see him and let him have one too. Ant way he was generally known as a "shelter king" if any Iron rations were flying around. Naturally none of us wanted to go out with him into a thousand square miles of woods and swamps and perhaps bumping (?) Bolos (Bolsheviks) who shot first and talked afterwards. About five recruits volunteered and the colonel wanted to know why we would not go out with the gallant office - he said so anyway - who was anxious to win a Military cross, but some Cockney said he'd win a military Funeral if he was not "careful and if he didn't keep out of range of the Bolo he'd soon be pushing up". Anyhow the patrol was wanted as another sergeant was detailed to ask for volunteers. Now we all liked this particular sergeant and he was he would go out with us too so he son got his twenty five.

We set out at about ten that night (broad daylight) twenty seven in a number all armed to the teeth, rifle, bayonet, machete and four Mill's bombs each. We had two Lewis gunners with us and we each carried 120 rounds of ammunition and two days food supply. Our instructions were to patrol the woods as far as possible behind the enemy lines and try to find the reason for the slow flow of water in the river. The river had been slowly going dry of late and our ships were nearly on bottom.

We had gone about twelve miles through the woods when the scouts reported hearing a large body of men moving towards us. At once each man selected a tree and waited for the enemy but we were domed to disappointment as the large body only consisted of four or five cattle. We camped for a few hours and then pushed on again. We had proceeded for some distance when [heard] the unmistakable report of a Bolo rifle and we all ducked for any shelter that we could. Soon the rifle fire increased and I heard the dull thud of a Mill's bomb and we fixed bayonets and marched forward. We found our advance guard mixed up in a hand to hand [fight] with twenty two Bolshevik Mongolians. The bayonet soon got to work and British grit and good wielding of the bayonet soon told and we were not long in overpowering the Bolos. No man escaped and all were killed outright. When we had got settled down again and were dressing the wounds of our wounded - three were fast aid - we heard a clatter of hoofs down the trail but the long drawn [Cooee](#).

(Here is a break in the story - apparently some pages were lost. The story continues with words about another desertion of a White Russian unit onto the Bolshevik side.

... equipment fell into the hands of the enemy who also secured a number of British *Lewis* and *Vickers* guns which had been taken away by a party of mutineers who escaped and joined the ranks of the revolutionaries. About a fortnight later we crossed to the left bank of the river and the machine Gunners went into position while the Fusiliers held the front line which extended from the left bank of the river between Yakaslevskoe and Seltzo - the Bolshevik's strongpoint at that time. The situation was critical and the suspense got on our nerves. Rumors came through from time to tome about evacuation but we were informed that we had to make a big stunt and give the Bolo a hard knock and thus give the loyal Russians heart and confidence before we could hand the position over to them and then leave.

At last the big stunt came off. After three days marching this woods and swamps where the guides only knew the way we attacked, hungry and tired, at twelve o'clock on Sunday 10th August when NN 3 and 4 sections of A Company 201st M.G.B. supported by D coy of the 45 R. Fus. (Australian section) and a few Russian infantry and Colonel Guards cavalry on the left bank of the Dvina and the remainder of the 45th R. Fus. And Machine Gunners on the right bank in cooperation with the monitors, airplanes and seaplanes and artillery made a combined attack on Seltzo, Sludka, Magooka and Portuga on the left bank and ... , Satanga, Gorodok and Borok on the right bank of the Dvina. The Bolo had been bombarded all the morning and they were terrified and they completely got the wind up for a while when they were charged with

bayonets fixed by the British battle scarred heroes of France and Belgium who slowly advanced in shorts and shirt sleeves regardless of the machine gun and rifle fire that stopped many a hero of France and Belgium entering the village of Portuga. Once in the village the fighting was short and decisive. The Australian section - thirty in number led d company through village after village. Our section of the M.G.B. had to concentrate on the gunboats lying in the river from the decks of which machine guns were sending a leaden hail into the ranks of the British forces. We held the position for about an hour and a half and silenced his guns and once a party of about 200 marines were landed to help his land forces but they never got twenty yards as they made a lovely target for the machine gunners. Seeing these machine guns were a source of annoyance to him he turned his six inch guns on us at about three hundred yards range and his first shot blew the gun, on which I was N1, into the air killing N2 and 3 men and left me out of action with a broken leg, a wound in ankle and elbow smashed. The remaining guns were soon put under cover and then we went on to the next village which had already been captured by the Fusiliers. Sunday August 10 will long live in my memory for that day saw the consummation of a scheme which was nothing less than a huge bluff. Bluff carried the British forces though that day.

Having captured Portuga, Magooka, Sludka and Lepowitz we expected to see British troops coming towards us from Seltzo but after five attempts the British in front of Seltzo we unsuccessful in taking the Bolo's position. The officer commanding our body of troops, after a consultation with his officers, decided to try and push his way through to, - "The old mill" as we termed it - N1 position on the extreme right of our line. Several civilians offered their services to guide us back to N1 position. We started on our way and the Bolo must have got wind of our movement as he made things very uncomfortable under a rain of shrapnel. After marching for about fourteen versts (about twelve mile) we came to a marsh a mile and a half across and this was bridged only by a two plank footbridge so you can understand the time it would take to get a big party, equipped and handicapped by the wounded on the stretchers to cross this bridge in single file. About half the party had got safely across the bridge and the remainder with the exception of the rearguard were strung out in single file over the whole bridge when the rearguard sent up word to get a move on as the Bolsheviks were coming on us from the rear. In about a quarter of an hour the rearguard was at grips with the Bolos but being only a handful they were soon overwhelmed. The Bolos continued to advance and as they came to the edge of the swamp they poured a volley into our line across the marsh. Many fell only slightly wounded but once in that soaking, sucking morass there was no hope of escape. A party went back as quickly as possible and put up a strong defense while everybody laid on the plank bridge. Two of our machine guns, which were safely on the opposite side of the swamp opened fire on the Bolsheviks and although at a long range made them run for cover and thus enabled the party to get across safely. I saw some sad sights along the remainder of that swamp - legs and arms sticking out of the mud and others on their last gasp. In that action alone we lost forty-two men when count was taken. Now we were faced with a dizzy problem as one of the guides had been killed and the other had made off into the woods. It was now about two o'clock in the morning and we were attacked again as a result of which we got split up into several parties without guides. In the part I was with there were thirty-nine armed men who were fit to fight and myself and two officers on stretchers and we were guarding over eighty prisoners. Several of the prisoners volunteered to lead us to Yakovlevskoye - our depot - but instead he led us on to a Bolshevik camp but there were only about twenty in all in the camp so we had a victory but we lost three men and gained nine prisoners. The guide was immediately shot. We were now feeling very hungry and thirsty but there was not an ounce of food per man. We wandered about the bush all day without food or water and were afraid to rest on account of the Bolsheviks whom we had an idea were following us up and we were correct as we were attacked again that night but the fellows who had rifles knew to use them and we only had one man wounded while the Bolsheviks lost eighteen killed and about twenty wounded. Our prisoners suffered here as over forty of them were either killed or wounded or fled into the woods. One man suggested shooting the remainder of the prisoners but the officer would not hear of it as he said they would be handy for the stretcher case. Hunger began to tell on us as we had had no food from Saturday night and there was now Monday night and we had had no water since Sunday night. All day Tuesday and Wednesday we wandered about in the wood and could not get out that thousand square miles of wood. On Thursday morning one of the soldiers went for a stroll through the wood and he found plenty of water and after a good drink we were much more satisfied although still hungry. Thursday night was very anxious for us as we heard several Bolshevik patrols pass pretty close to us and on Friday morning about five o'clock we found we were surrounded. A hot engagement took place or about an hour and four of our chaps were killed and several wounded. The Bolos drew off for a while till about seven o'clock when they attacked strongly but were met with a good volley from only twenty rifles. I was lying on my left side on the stretchers and noticed the hap next to me roll over on to his back and I saw his was shot through forehead so I made an effort and got his rifle and did my best with it. Things were looking pretty serious about eight o'clock. Ammunition nearly all used and everyone exhausted with hunger we were in a bad position. The Bolos charged the third time about twenty strong and some pretty hot hand to hand fighting went on for about ten minutes we heard a cheer and about fifty or sixty Fusiliers came on the scene and saved us from complete annihilation. Out of the whole party of forty-two only sixteen were alive and only three of them unwounded but they all sold

their lives dearly. About twenty of prisoners were alive and they were nearly all wounded. I got these figures from a mate in hospital. I remember the cheer and seeing the Fusiliers but the last thing I remember was a drop of rum or something being forced between my lips. Then I slept for about six hours and found we were still marching through the woods and one of the stretcher bearers asked me if I wanted any to eat. He gave me a pound tin of bully beef and I don't think I ever enjoyed anything better in all my life than that and a drink of water. At the aid post we got warm tea and rum and plenty to eat. I was in the casualty clearing station next day and my boot had to be cut off my foot, which had turned gang green and septic. My leg was also broken above the knee and my right arm was dislocated at the elbow but with all this I was satisfied as it meant one thing to me - *Blighty*.

I had a good trip down the river on the hospital barge [In Archangel] the doctor told me that I would be sent to *Blighty* on the hospital ship on the 29th of August and would most likely have to have my leg amputated. Good prospects. I was very glad when we sailed from Archangel on the 29th as I knew then that I was at last away from Bolsheviks country but I pitied the troops left behind to effect the evacuation. The evacuation was a success one month later under General Rawlinson.

I have often wondered since - why England ever sent troops to Russia?

The material was received from the Australian War Memorial