

[Delivered to the Heraldry and Genealogy Society of Canberra on 1 May 2012 and published in the Discovery Lodge of Research *Transactions* in September 2012.]

Freemasonry in the Australian Military

by Bro Neil Wynes Morse, KL

Tonight I wished to present a panorama of Masonic activity in the Australian military forces. However, that narrative would exceed the two hour time limit I have been given, so I will provide a number of snapshots.

The association of Freemasonry with the military in Australia is almost as long as European settlement in this young country. In January 1788, the 'first Fleet', comprising the vessels *Sirius*, *Supply*, three store ships and six transports carrying convicts, under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip, arrived in Botany Bay to establish a settlement in New South Wales. Finding Botany Bay unsuitable, the expedition moved to Port Jackson and, on 26 January 1788, the first steps for the foundation of a colony were taken.

The company of marines which formed part of Philip's expedition included men who have been identified as Freemasons. Among them was Thomas Lucas, who later settled on Norfolk Island and subsequently in Van Diemen's Land upon the evacuation of Norfolk Island around 1808. A convict, Thomas Prior, who also arrived in New South Wales by the first Fleet, has a Masonic symbol on the headstone to his grave, but this is circumstantial evidence only.

The marine companies assigned to service in Australia with Captain Phillip were relieved in 1791 by the New South Wales Corps. The Corps was established in 1789 specifically for service in New South Wales. It came into conflict with the civil authority in the Colony and its involvement in the rebellion against Governor Bligh in 1808 led to its redesignation as the 102nd Foot and its return to England in 1810. In command of the Corps were Major Francis Grose, from 1789 to 1794, and Lieut. Colonel William Paterson, from 1794 to 1809.

It has been suggested that the colonial authorities of the day were actually opposed to the formation of Masonic lodges in the units. The historian, Wright, says that in 1792 Governor Phillip, 'refused his officers permission to set up a Masonic Lodge at Port Jackson',¹ although it has not been found possible to confirm this and Wright destroyed the notes he used when writing this particular work.

During the period when Paterson was in charge of the Corps, an attempt was made to establish a regular warranted Lodge in Australia. Cramp and Mackaness, the historians who jointly wrote the first two volumes of the history of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales, note² that in the records of the Grand Lodge of Ireland is reference to a meeting of that Grand Lodge on 6 July 1797 where a petition was received from George Kerr, Peter Farrell and George Black praying for the issue of a warrant to be held in the New South Wales Corps, then serving at Port Jackson in New South Wales. The Grand Lodge discussed the petition and a decision whether to issue a warrant was deferred. The matter has not yet be reconsidered!

The authors speculate that there may have been a Lodge in the Corps and that Kerr, Farrell, and Black were its three principal officers, but there is no evidence to support this.

It should be noted that by 1797 Governor Hunter had replaced Governor Arthur Phillip as officer in charge of the colony and if, as suggested by Wright, Governor Phillip had been opposed to Freemasonry, it is possible that Kerr, Farrell and Black may have thought Hunter more favourably disposed. At all events, nothing came of their initiative.

The story of the very early development of Freemasonry in Australia is inextricably linked to British Regiments.

Regular Freemasonry—'regular' in the sense of a lodge working under the authority of a warrant issued by a recognised Grand Lodge—first came to New South Wales with the arrival of the 46th (South Devonshire) Regiment in 1814. Like a number of its successors, the Regiment had attached to it a Lodge, in this case the Lodge of Social and Military Virtues No 227 working under the Irish Constitution. Its authority



¹ Wright, R: *The Forgotten Generation of Norfolk Island and Van Diemen's Land*, Sydney 1986, 37.

² Cramp, K R and Mackaness, G: *A History of the United Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of New South Wales*, Sydney 1938.

from the Grand Lodge of Ireland was an ambulatory warrant, one issued to the Lodge to enable it to conduct Masonic ceremonies wherever the Lodge was stationed. The 46th Regiment was replaced by the 48th, to which was attached Lodge No 218 IC, and the Regiments following included the 40th, with its Lodge No 284 IC, and the 39th with Lodge No 128 IC.

A statement by Crossle of the Lodge of Research of Ireland succinctly summarises the importance of Irish Freemasonry in the establishment of the Craft in New South Wales. Crossle says:

The formation of regular Freemasonry in Australia was absolutely and essentially Irish in its origin, and was due, in the first place, to an Irish Military Lodge in which young settlers were initiated, and who were then granted a dispensation by the Military Brethren to form a Lodge; and in the second place, to the constitution of that Lodge under a regular warrant from the Grand Lodge of Ireland.

The detailed story has been told by a Canberra historian far greater than I, my Masonic mentor and friend, the late Bob Linford, and I leave it to you to read his accounts. Please see me later if you are interested in learning more of this area.

Let us now move to the other end of the 19th century and the Boer War.

No records are known of Masonic activity amongst Australian colonial volunteers on active service. However there are records of a meeting which is relevant.

Imperial troops occupied Bloemfontein in March 1900 and on St George's Day, 23 April of that year, an historic meeting of Lodge Rising Star was held in the Masonic Hall in that city. With a German national, WBro I H Haarbuerger, presiding, those attending included Lord Kitchener, Lord Casterton (then the Grand Secretary of the Irish Constitution) and, to quote a contemporary news report, 'a goodly number of military masons from all parts of the Empire', including 'Australians and Tasmanians'. The work of the evening was to initiate into Freemasonry a Canadian war correspondent. Apologies were received from Field Marshal Lord Roberts, who was both Commander-in-Chief for South Africa and a Senior Grand Warden of the United Grand Lodge of England.

I shall now move to World War I.

I found the following report of the Masonic activities of a group of brethren attached to the Third Australian General Hospital in WWI; this was compiled by Bro C Stuart, Lodge St John, Manly, NSW, in 1917, and I will read some selected portions:

Soon after ... 15 May 1915, when the Third Australian General Hospital left Australia for active service abroad, it was found that several Masons were included among the officers and other ranks of the Unit and an endeavour was made to hold a social gathering on board.

The prime movers in this were Bros. L Logan, of No. 161 and Mark No. 8 NSW and J J Fraser of No. 508 EC Singapore whose efforts, for various reasons, met with no success.

The Unit was divided into several parties upon reaching England, sent to various places in the Southern Counties and re-assembled after some nine days at the Rest Camp on Southampton Common; a very beautiful spot on the outskirts of that ancient port.

During the week the Unit was stationed here various members were able to visit a Lodge where they were welcomed most heartily.

Only one visit was possible as the Unit entrained to Devonport, thence by HMT *Simla*, since a victim to submarines, to the Dardanelles and was stationed on Lemnos Island until six weeks after the evacuation of Gallipoli.

As it was the nearest Hospital to the firing line it can be readily understood that hard work and long hours were the portion of its staff for many months.

It was therefore impossible to organize any Masonic gatherings until the work of the Hospital had settled down and the first social meeting of Masonic brethren was held in the Post Office tent of the Third Australian General Hospital on St. Andrew's Day, the 30th November 1915.

Proved Masons to the number of twenty one from various Units on the Island were invited and an enjoyable evening spent.

The organization of this, the initial gathering of Masons under active service conditions, was well carried out by Bros. F Smythe, L Logan, C Stuart and J J Frazer, all, with the exception of the latter, from NSW Lodges. Here must be instanced the absolute necessity for strict examination before admitting strangers to any description of Masonic gathering.

The brethren mentioned above insisted upon this and in addition carried out an examination among themselves running through three degrees. They then passed to the various applicants for admission to the South and found one who, although he belonged to another Order, was not a Mason.

He was not admitted.

On the 29th December 1915 a second gathering was arranged to take place at the Motor Transport Depot.

Thirty four brethren attended and never was the universal spread of Freemasonry more exemplified than upon this occasion.

A tent pitched upon a rocky hillside within sound of the guns of Gallipoli with all the turmoil of modern warfare surging around. Outside were armed sentries pacing their allotted beat ready to repel intruders should the occasion arise

and within, to the dim light of a few hurricane lamps, a gathering of Masons such as had probably never before been known under like circumstances in the history of the Craft.

They came from the ends of the earth, these men with one end – to serve, – from England, Canada, Scotland, the islands of Barbados, Florida, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Tasmania, India, the Straits Settlements, Mexico, from Egypt and ranks from a General down to Privates were able to relax and spend a few hours free from the strain and horrors of this world war.

The Hospital was next stationed at Abbassieh, Cairo, where it was possible to visit several established Lodges, notably the Lord Kitchener Lodge (3402 EC), the Lotus Lodge (3296 EC), the Bulwar Lodge (1068 EC) and several Greek Lodges where, although the visiting brother was unable to understand the language, it was quite easy to follow the working of the various degrees and mightily interesting.

The Lodges in Cairo were doing most excellent work for the Craft and entertained many visitors at their assemblies.

Through the kindness of the WM of Lord Kitchener Lodge a member of this Unit was initiated; Brother A Butler became a MM while in England and has proved himself a worthy Mason in every way.

In October 1916 the Unit returned to England and was stationed for some months at the Kitchener Hospital, Brighton.

Here the resident Masons extended a welcome the memory of which can never be effaced, and the Australian brethren were at once made Honorary Members of their most excellent Club in the Queens Road.

Invitations to visit the many ancient Lodges in Brighton and Hove were given from all sides and many were the enjoyable evenings and days spent in the company of men who were truly brothers to their visitors from overseas.

April 1917 saw the Hospital in France and on the 31st December 1917 the third Masonic gathering on active service was held, but under very different circumstances to those previous.

It was possible to obtain a building and the Dental Operating Hut was cleared of its various impediments and re-furnished for the occasion.

Instead of a tent upon a hillside with a few tables, wooden forms and hurricane lamps was a room with snowy table linen, gleaming cutlery and glass, electric light and tables beautifully decorated with flowers, plants and fernery.

Twenty four brethren, whose Mother Lodges were far apart, gathered for an evening which closed in harmony at 11-0 pm.

It may be of interest to note that of the twenty-one brethren present at the first meeting only three were left to carry on the work so ably commenced at the Dardanelles. The rest are scattered far and wide, from Belgium to Palestine, some may have made the greatest sacrifice of all, other wounded and invalided to their homes, while the rest are carrying on wherever they may be.

The fourth gathering held on the eve of Anzac Day, an anniversary that will live forever in the history of Australia and New Zealand, saw an increase in the numbers present.

Twenty-seven brethren attended, including for the first time in the precis of these gatherings, a brother from the United States of America.

Many ranks were represented ranging from Colonels to Privates and some of the brothers came in for many miles around to this gathering which included an EA Freemason in the person of a member of the Unit, Brother S Porter, who was of valuable assistance in regard to the excellent dinner provided.

Various excellent songs and speeches were rendered and an evening enjoyed which recompensed the President, Secretary and Committee for their work.

Undoubtedly these gatherings, which unite brethren from all parts of the world, are of valuable assistance to Masons while on active service, affording as they do an opportunity for brothers to know each other and to meet and be relieved for a while from the strain of the days that have past and are to come until their present task is ended.

There the document ends; and we are left surmising what Masonic activities the brethren of the General Hospital may have been able to conduct during the hectic days which were to come in 1918 in France, and afterwards.

Then we come to World War II. In his definitive work on Freemasonry in Australia's Near North, *The Craft in the East*, Christopher Haffner wrote:³

Brethren in Changi Camp, Singapore, had been holding lodges of instruction under dispensation. Large numbers of prisoners were moved out of the camp at the end of 1942 to work on the infamous death railway. No masonic activity amongst these brethren is known to have taken place until 1944 when the railway was completed and the prisoners who were left were concentrated together.

The statement regarding activity on the railway is incorrect: there was at least one meeting on the line. In late 1942 the Japanese commenced sending 'working parties' to various parts of South East Asia to undertake work mainly relating to infrastructure development. Most of these parties were sourced from the thousands of allied POWs held at the Changi camp in Singapore. Of these, the most remembered today were those sent to build the railway from Burma to Thailand. Each party was given a designation, and the men I will talk about were part of 'F' Force. This group, of about 7000 men, included some 3660 Australians, and

³ Haffner, C: *The Craft in the East*, District Grand Lodge of Hong Kong and the Far East, Hong Kong 1988, 226.

was despatched in April 1943.⁴ After a march of 20 days, 'F' Force arrived at Shimo (Lower) Songkurai to commence work on the railway.

Some 34.1% of all Australian prisoners of the Japanese died—the highest of all nationalities of POWs. The rate of death of the impressed labour (or *romusha*) from all over South East Asia used on the line is unknown, but is believed to be up to 75%. This latter figure comes into perspective when you recall that 60% of the Russians captured by the Germans died.

According to the Australian *Official History*, Kami Sangkurai (or Songkurai) was the worst camp on the railway; the facilities were even more primitive than elsewhere, the Korean guards more brutal, the IJA officers even more sadistic, and the death rate reflected these conditions, being the highest on the line: 60% of Australians and 80% British.

Among the officers to go with 'F' Force was an Army Chaplain, George Polain, who was a member of Lodge Canobolas, meeting in Orange, who had earlier attended Masonic meetings in Changi.⁵ Indicative of his Masonic involvement is the fact that, on his return from the Railway, Polain is recorded as having delivered a paper on 'Signs and Symbols' to the Roberts Barracks Masonic Association on 19 February 1944.

Late in 1943 Padre Polain formed a Masonic group which he called the 'Kami Sankurai Club'. The first meeting was held on 13 October 1943 and 14 brethren attended. Of these, nine had attended meetings in Changi of the Roberts Hospital Masonic Association.

Of the 14 brethren in attendance, 12 acted as officers of the lodge. The card lists the attendees as:

WM:	WBro. G Polain	Canobolas, Orange
IPM:	Bro. Barton	San Souci 442, NSW
SW:	Bro. Hislop	Concord 98, NSW
JW:	Bro. Biggs	Wangaratta 66, Vic
Chap:	Bro. Thompson	Melbourne Temperance, 200
Sec.	Bro. Wingfield	Balwyn 245, Vic
DC:	Bro. Browne	Prince Alfred 94, NSW
SD:	Bro. Lovell	Covenant, Bexley NSW
JD:	Bro. Kearton	Wisdom 526, Vic
IG:	Bro. Pedvin	Capital 612, Canberra ACT
T:	Bro. Goulding	Monaro 164, Cooma NSW
Treas:	Bro. Hodge	Ionic 109, Tungamah Vic

Also attending were Bros. N A Spratt (Ibis 361, Griffith NSW) and Jackson (Seddon 242, Footscray Vic).

Bro Lovell said of the meeting:⁶

I was on the Burma railway at a camp called Kami Sankurai, nine miles from the Burma-Thailand border. No words can describe the horror of that place, yet even there amidst death and despair there emerged a Padre Polain who formed a masonic meeting. About a dozen men met when the opportunity arose. It was a very risky business. At our first meeting I made cards to commemorate the meeting. The pencil and paper was somehow supplied by George Polain, a minor miracle in itself under the circumstances. It was the only bit of paper I managed to bring back.

For this it would appear that more than one meeting was held, but without evidence this must be considered only a supposition.

Not long after I received a copy of the commemorative card, I found that the son of Bro Pedvin was living in a neighbouring suburb. I gave Mr Pedvin a copy of the card and he, in turn, provided me with an extract from his father's diary for 14 October 1943, which reads: 'Last night 12 of us attended a Masonic Club Meeting. Padre Pollane [*sic*] gave a most interesting talk on the different degrees up to the 30th Degree.'⁷ The meeting was held just outside the cemetery, 'where the Japs did not patrol'.⁸

The card issued to commemorate the meeting shows a group of men seated on logs under a tree outside the cemetery fence, with one (the tyler?) leaning against the tree. The business of the meeting, as set out on the card, was a lecture by WBro Polain entitled 'The Higher Side and Progress in Freemasonry'.

I have prepared a facsimile of the commemorative card produced by Bill Lovell and I will distribute copies shortly.

⁴ McCormack, G and Nelson, H: *The Burma-Thailand Railway: memory and history*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney 1993. This book is essential reading on the topic, particularly for non-Australian readers.

⁵ Morse, N W: 'The Roberts Hospital POW Masonic Association', unpublished paper. This paper outlines the activities of this group from December 1942 to May 1944 in the Changi camp.

⁶ Personal correspondence from the late Bro Bill Lovell, 1992.

⁷ Unpublished diary entry for 14 October 1943 by L J Pedvin, quoted by kind permission of his son, Mr Brian Pedvin.

⁸ Personal correspondence from the late Bro Bill Lovell, 1992.

I would like to conclude with a short 'Show and Tell'.

Towards the end of the War, all over the South East Pacific area Australian servicemen Masons met in fraternal gatherings. We have records of fifty groups from Townsville to Morotai, and from Labuan to Milne Bay.

These groups have been documented by Roy Fursman of Queensland. He lists over two thousand men who have been identified as attending these fraternal clubs. If your relative was a Freemason, and attended a meeting in the SEP area, the chances are very strong that Roy has recorded his attendance. I have here a copy of his material, and further, more recent, discoveries made by Ewart Stronach of Sydney.

It is possible that, during your research, you have come across a reference to a forebear's involvement in Freemasonry. Should you want amplification, or explanation, please contact me.

If I can't assist, I have low friends in high places who can!

Some years ago many of the records of the United Grand Lodge of New South Wales were digitised by members of the LDS Church. There is a modicum of errors. The Internet link is:

<<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/show#uri=http://hr-search-api:8080/searchapi/search/collection/1834852>>