

The Battle of Kosturino: the Irish-Australian connection

by JEFF KILDEA

The Battle of Kosturino is a little-known action in the little-known Macedonian campaign during the very well-known First World War. While this minor clash in the Balkans in December 1915 is of little significance in the overall context of the war, its interest for me as an Australian is that the battle involved troops from the 10th (Irish) Division, recently transferred from Gallipoli where the Division's 29th Brigade had served alongside the Anzacs during the August offensive at Lone Pine, Quinn's Post, Chunuk Bair and Hill 60. At the Battle of Kosturino a small contingent of Australian soldiers served alongside the Irish.¹

Background: Kosturino is a village in the Republic of Macedonia (a.k.a. Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), given the country's naming dispute with Greece since 1991 following the break-up of Yugoslavia). In 1915 the village was in the Kingdom of Serbia. As every school student knows the First World War had its origins in the Balkans when a Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip assassinated the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo. But once the fighting began the focus of the war quickly shifted to Belgium, France and Russia while the Balkans, the source of the conflict, was all but forgotten. Out of the limelight, the Serbians held the vengeful Austrians back for twelve months while the governments of their Balkan neighbours (especially Bulgaria and Greece) debated within themselves whether to side with the Austrians or the Entente.

With the Entente's fortunes declining both on the Eastern and Western Fronts and at Gallipoli, the Bulgarians decided in early October 1915 to cast their lot with the Austrians. Soon Serbia found itself under attack from both the north by the Austrians, reinforced by the Germans, and from the east by the Bulgarians. Scrambling to assist their ally, the enthusiastic French and the less enthusiastic British sent troops to Salonika (Thessaloniki) in north-eastern Greece from where they would cross into southern Serbia to restrain the Bulgarians. But the Entente allies dithered and by the time they arrived the Serbians were in retreat towards Albania in the hope of evacuation by sea.

The 10th (Irish) Division at Salonika: The vanguard of the British commitment was the 10th (Irish) Division, which began leaving Lemnos for Salonika on 5 October 1915 as the Austrians and Germans were about to launch their attack on Serbia. The Irish assembled at camps north of Salonika from where they advanced

¹ Accounts of the Battle of Kosturino and of the Macedonian campaign include: Alan Warwick Palmer, *The Gardeners of Salonika: The Macedonian Campaign, 1915-1918* (Faber & Faber, 2009); Alan Wakefield and Simon Moody, *Under the Devil's Eye: Britain's Forgotten Army at Salonika 1915-1918* (History Press, 2004); Stephen Sandford, *Neither Unionist nor Nationalist: The 10th (Irish) Division in the Great War 1914-1918* (Irish Academic Press, 2014), pp 96-100; H.F.N. Jourdain, *Record of the 5th (Service) Battalion the Connaught Rangers from 19th August, 1914 to 17th January, 1916*, N & M Press reprint (original 1916), 2002, pp 125-230.

piecemeal over the next few weeks towards the Belashitza Mountains to assist the French, already deployed there as well as further up the Vardar valley.

On the night of 20-21 November the Irish took over from the French a line running along a ridge that runs south-east from Kosturino towards the Greek border at Lake Doiran. In the event of an attack, it was essential for the Irish to hold this position long enough to prevent the Bulgarians from cutting off the line of withdrawal of the French from their positions further north.

However, the defensive line along the Kosturino ridge was precarious. The rocky ground limited the depth of trenches to about 2 feet (600 mm), thus affording the Irish little protection from artillery and machine gun fire from the nearby mountains occupied by Bulgarians. Moreover, less than a kilometre in front of their position was an isolated craggy knoll, which the British called Rocky Peak. Overlooking the ridge, it enfiladed both ends of the Irish line where it took dog-leg turns. Denying the Bulgarians access to Rocky Peak was essential if the Irish were to hold the ridge. Consequently, at the risk of being cut-off, a party from the 5th Royal Irish Fusiliers was sent forward to occupy Rocky Peak.

As if the tactical situation were not bad enough, on 26 November the weather turned foul. Torrential rain preceded a blizzard which saw temperatures drop below freezing, followed by sleet and snow turning the position into a slurry of mud and snow. With temperatures falling to minus 22 degrees Celsius, almost a thousand men affected by frostbite were sent to the rear. Then, with a break in the weather on 4 December, the Bulgarians began to bombard the Irish position in preparation for an attack.

Battle of Kosturino: The left of the Irish line, called Dollymount, was held by the 30th Brigade, while the right, called Bray Head, was held by the 31st Brigade. The 29th Brigade was in reserve. However, on 29 November the 5th Connaught Rangers and 10th Hampshire Regiment of the 29th Brigade were ordered to relieve the 7th Royal Dublin Fusiliers and the 6th Royal Munster Fusiliers of the 30th Brigade to give them a spell of warmth. The relief was meant to be for 48 hours or 72 hours at the most. But then word came that on 11 December the division was to withdraw to Salonika, and the Rangers and Hampshires stayed in the front line. To facilitate the withdrawal non-essential stores were ordered to be sent to the rear. Even though the weather remained bitterly cold the order included the extra blankets and leather jerkins with which the men had been issued because of the conditions. But the planned withdrawal never eventuated.

Early on 7 December the Bulgarians in overwhelming numbers rushed and seized Rocky Peak. Then throughout the morning they poured a withering fire into the Irish trenches before mounting an attack on Dollymount pushing the defenders off that section of the ridge. By early afternoon the survivors were forced back to Crête Simonet and Crête Rivet, names which the French had given the two knolls to the south of the Kosturino Ridge. Some retreated further south as far as the reserve area at Tatarli and divisional headquarters at Dedeli. The forward line having been breached the 31st Brigade also withdrew to the new line.

Fortunately, the Bulgarians did not follow up their attack with vigour so that the Irish were able to hold their new position for the next two days, enabling the

French to withdraw to the Greek side of the border at Doiran and then the Irish to follow. Under orders from the Germans, who were still hoping that Greece would join their side, the Bulgarians halted at the border. By 20 December the British and French troops had returned to Salonika.

Defending the Birdcage: For the next two and a half years British-French force remained at Salonika, which was heavily fortified with barbed wire, resulting in the defensive position being called the Birdcage. So extensive were the earthworks that Clemenceau contemptuously described the French troops there as 'the gardeners of Salonika'. Reinforced by additional British and French divisions and by troops from Russia, Italy and Serbia, the allies ventured outside the Birdcage in the summer of 1916 to take on the Bulgarians who with German support had now crossed the border. During the summer campaign the 10th (Irish) Division fought a number of actions in the Struma valley to the east of Salonika. If bitter cold had taken its toll in December, intense heat and mosquitos did further damage during the summer months. Between June and October 6,500 members of the 10th Division were admitted to hospital with malaria.

The Australian connection: The Australian connection with the Salonika campaign is best known in relation to the 370 Australian nurses who were sent there to staff the British hospitals at Hortiatis, Kalamaria and Arnissa, eventually comprising 20 per cent of the British Army's nursing staff in Greece. Among them was the novelist Miles Franklin.²

Less well known is the contingent of first-line transport drivers from the 6th Brigade of the Second Australian Division who took part in the Battle of Kosturino. When the brigade sailed to Gallipoli 52 drivers remained at Lemnos under the command of Lieutenant William Merriman Trew of the 24th Battalion.³ They were later attached to the 10th (Irish) Division and sailed with them to Salonika and bivouacked at the division's camp on the Lembeti Road. From there they assisted in transporting the division's supplies to the Kosturino battlefield. They were then assigned to duty as a divisional headquarters guard, caring for the division's mountain ponies, guarding Bulgarian prisoners and assisting the evacuation of the wounded and victims of frostbite. Following the division's withdrawal and return to Salonika, the Australian contingent's services were no longer required and the men sailed for Alexandria, where they rejoined their units in late December and early January.⁴

Other Australians also served at Salonika, but in the British Army.⁵ They included two officers who would become senior Australian military commanders

² Jim Claven, 'They Came to Help: Australian Soldiers and Nurses in Thessaloniki in the First World War', in *Sister Cities: Melbourne-Thessaloniki, 30th Anniversary Celebrations (1984-2014)* (Melbourne: Thessaloniki Association, 2014), pp 25-33; Panayiotis Diamadis, 'Aegean Eucalypts', in *Modern Greek Studies* (Australia & New Zealand), vol. 13, 2005, pp 86-105; Hugh Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, vol. 2 *The Middle Years* (Halstead Press, 1997), chapter 6.

³ *Reveille*, vol. viii (No 4: December 1934), p. 33.

⁴ Captain E. Gorman, *'With the Twenty-Second': a history of the Twenty-Second Battalion, A.I.F.* (rev. ed., Windsor (Vic): Jenkin Buxton Printers, 2001), p. 120.

⁵ Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, ch. 5, claims there were about 100, and lists 87 names.

during the Second World War. Major John Lavarack (later Lieutenant General Sir John Lavarack) was the Brigade Major Royal Artillery with the British 22nd Division,⁶ while Second Lieutenant Ned Herring (later Lieutenant General Sir Edmund Herring), also with the 22nd Division's artillery, was awarded the Military Cross and the Distinguished Service Order for his service on the Macedonian front.⁷ Another Military Cross recipient was Second Lieutenant Brice Mackinnon of Melbourne, who received the award for his part in the fighting in 1917 while serving with the Black Watch.⁸ Some Australians had Irish connections. Second Lieutenant Ralph Neville Cullen (a.k.a. Cohen), whose family were from Maitland in New South Wales, was one of those of the Royal Irish Fusiliers who died fighting to hold Rocky Peak on the morning of the Bulgarian attack.⁹ Dr Cecil McAdam of St Kilda in Victoria was serving with the Royal Army Medical Corps when he was evacuated sick from Salonika to England. While there he visited Ireland and was caught up in the Easter rising in April 1916.¹⁰

Conclusion: The 10th (Irish) Division suffered badly at Gallipoli, particularly at Suvla Bay. After their evacuation Major Bryan Cooper of the 5th Connaught Rangers wrote: 'The 10th Division had been shattered, the work of a year had been destroyed in a week, and nothing material had been gained'. Their experience at Salonika was not much better. Sent into battle in a campaign that had no chance of success, for the Serbians had already been defeated, and which the British government viewed with repugnance,¹¹ the men of the 10th Division deployed along the Kosturino Ridge endured appalling conditions before being routed by the overwhelming force of the Bulgarian army. German insistence that the Bulgarians halt at the border probably saved them from annihilation.

The fighting on the Macedonian front continued into 1917, during which year the Greeks joined the Entente forces, and into 1918, when the allies launched an attack into Serbia and Bulgaria which saw the Bulgarians surrender on 30 September 1918. However, the 10th (Irish) Division did not take part in the final victorious stage of the campaign. In September 1917 it had been transferred to Palestine to join General Allenby's desert force, where once more it served alongside Australian soldiers, this time the Australian Light Horse at Beersheba and in the advance to Jerusalem.

⁶ Robert Stevenson, 'The anatomy of a division: the 1st Australian Division in the Great War, 1914-1919', Ph.D. thesis, U.N.S.W., 2010, p. 310. David Horner, 'Lavarack, Sir John Dudley (1885-1957)', *A.D.B.*, Vol 15, (Melbourne University Press, 2000). Lavarack was in Britain when war broke out and although appointed to the Australian Imperial Force in February 1915, was not able to report to the A.I.F. until the middle of 1916.

⁷ Geoff Browne, 'Herring, Sir Edmund Francis (Ned) (1892-1982)', *A.D.B.*, vol 17 (Melbourne University Press, 2007).

⁸ Alf Batchelder, *Melbourne Cricket Club Roll of Honour 1914-1918*, 1998, p. 14.

⁹ Gilchrist, *Australians and Greeks*, pp 94-95.

¹⁰ *Argus*, 15 June 1916, p. 6.

¹¹ Alan Palmer describes the diplomatic background to the campaign in chapter 2 of *The Gardeners of Salonika*, concluding, 'Not for many decades had a British Government embarked on a military undertaking with greater repugnance'.

