

British War Brides of Chinese Australian Diggers

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Alastair Kennedy from the Australian Demographic and Social Research Institute at Canberra's ANU, has unearthed a handful of unusual war brides from the First World War. Alastair writes about the brides he has found...

Contrary to official policy, both Chinese-Australians and Aboriginal Australians enlisted in the 1st AIF to fight alongside their fellow countrymen of European parentage. The story of the 400 or so Aboriginal diggers has been well documented but that of the Chinese-Australians and their British war brides has, with a few exceptions, passed unnoticed, unrecorded and, in family histories, conveniently forgotten because of the taint of 'mixed blood'.

Australia's early Chinese population

The 1911 Federal Census recorded some 23,000 full-blooded and half-caste Chinese males in Australia. Of these only 2,300 were born in Australia and thus, if between the ages of 18 and 45, eligible to enlist provided they could persuade the Recruiting Officer they were 'of sufficiently European parentage or descent'. Morag Loh estimates the numbers eligible were very small, perhaps no more than 800 to 1,000. I have identified 197 from the Service records held by the National Archives of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, ADFA, La Trobe University, the Chinese museums in Cairns, Bendigo and Melbourne, and various family histories.

Some 15,400 war brides sailed for Australia in 1919 to be reunited with their Australian Digger husband or fiancées. On examining AIF Service Records I found that 5 Chinese-Australians had married British girls whilst in the UK and that 3 had joined their husbands in Australia after the war, with one more coming out as a fiancée and marrying her soldier in Sydney.

The Assassin of Gallipoli

The one soldier who did not bring his war bride back was William Edward Sing DCM, Belgian Croix de Guerre, the famous sniper from Queensland, nicknamed The Assassin of Gallipoli. In 1917, whilst in Edinburgh, he met and married Elizabeth Stewart, the daughter of a Royal Navy cook and a restaurant waitress by employment. She appears in his Service Record as his next of kin and, according to one source Sing successfully applied in December 1918 to the Australian High Commission

in London for a free passage for his wife from Scotland to Queensland.

But nothing seems to have happened. In August 1919 Sing wrote to the Repatriation Office in Brisbane saying that his wife, in her most recent letter of 28 May, had not received any instructions about her passage to Australia. Thereafter there is silence. Elizabeth never arrived in Clermont and probably never took ship to Australia.

One can speculate about the reason for her non-appearance. Perhaps a clue lies in two of the pages of Billy Sing's medical records. He married Elizabeth in late June 1917 and then returned to his unit in France. On the medical records dated in early December 1917 there are two entries relating to his admission to the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station and 39 General Hospital at Le Havre, firstly with a diagnosis of VD and then syphilis. He was away from his unit for a total of 60 days. Perhaps Elizabeth came to hear of this and decided he was not the best choice for a husband?

Henry Gee married 18-year-old Gwendoline Reid

By contrast, Henry Frederick Ah Gee, born in Bowen in 1894, enlisted in 1915, was sent first to Gallipoli and then to the Western Front and England. There, he met and later married Gwendoline Eva (nee Reid) in Grantham on 12 March 1917. She was just 18 years old, a spinster and the daughter of Walter Harold Reid (deceased), a builder, of 17 Norton Street Grantham.

She came out to Australia and settled with him in Bowen where he became a Sanitary Inspector. According to the Bowen Electoral Rolls of 1925 and 1930 they lived in Gregory Street, but later moved to Brisbane. When the Second World War came he re-enlisted under the name of Gee and served from late 1940 to late 1941 with the rank of Warrant Officer. He was still alive in 1968, writing letters to Central Army Records in Melbourne complaining about his missing ANZAC medal for service at Gallipoli in 1915.

Did James Foo go AWOL to marry Marion Ralphs?

James Foo, born in Auchenflower, Brisbane, in 1894, enlisted in November 1915 and trained at Enoggera Camp. He was Catholic, a carter by trade and his father Charles Foo is described as a farmer. He became a driver in 41 Bn with whom he served in France. After the Armistice he worked with No 3 Group HQ in England, possibly in the London area. In June 1919 he was Absent without Leave (AWOL) for some 24 hours and forfeited a day's pay. Perhaps this is connected with his marriage on 13 August 1919 in St Aloysius's Roman Catholic Chapel near Euston Station, London, to Marion Ralphs (formerly Nolan), aged 26, a widow, whose father Michael Nolan (deceased) was described as a 'Linen Card Room Jobber'.

They later embarked together with one child on SS Benalla, arrived in Brisbane on 29 November 1919 and went to the house in Lang Parade, Auchenflower, in which his widowed mother Bridget lived. He was eventually discharged from the Army in late January 1920. James returned to his trade as a carter, with Marion shown as performing 'household duties' on the Electoral Rolls of Toowong Sub District, Brisbane, at the same address in 1921 and 1936.

George Gook, left behind a girlfriend and married Lilian Bence

George Edward Gook, born in Mysia, Victoria, in 1895, enlisted in September 1914 at the very start of the War. He was a labourer, like his father and many of his family who lived around Inglewood. On his enlistment papers he wrote 'In the event of Edith Pretty giving birth to a child before July 1915 I agree to allot one fifth of my pay to the child'! He was wounded at Gallipoli and on the Western Front in France.

His military record is patchy; he made Sergeant but was also court-martialled in the field for absence and sentenced to 5 years penal servitude, later reduced because of his 'good character and service record'. When in England, probably at Codford Training Camp, near Warminster, Wiltshire, he met Lilian May Bence, also aged 24, and they married at Trowbridge Parish Church, Wiltshire, on 17 February 1919. She sailed with him back to Australia on SS Dunvegan Castle, arriving in Melbourne on 23 August 1919. He was discharged from the Army in September and he took her to Inglewood where they settled in Sullivan Street near his extended family. He returned to being a labourer and they appear on the Inglewood Electoral Rolls in 1919, 1924, 1931 and 1936. By 1938 they had moved to Powlett Road, Inglewood, and he applied to Army Records for a copy of his Army discharge papers lost in a fire some 12 years earlier.

James Sam and Harriet Hill

The Sam brothers — James Francis and Henry Herbert — from West Wyalong in New South Wales, enlisted in 1915 and served first in Gallipoli and then in France. At least 3 if not 4 of their other brothers also enlisted — the family story is shown in Morag Loh's book as an example of how the local press praised such a patriotic family, even if they were of Chinese descent (but with a white Australian mother, formerly Miss Jane Bennet).

James Francis met Harriet Hill either during his stay at the Perham Down camp in 1917 or after the war had ended when in London on leave; she came out by boat as his fiancée in 1920 and they married in Sydney later that year. They stayed on in

Sydney, James Francis changed the family name from 'Sam' to 'Sams', he became a grocer and they lived firstly at 37c Rose Street, Glebe, (1930 Electoral Roll) and later at 193 Botany Road, Mascot (1936).

Henry Herbert and Ethel Kirby arrived with a baby

Henry

Herbert met Ethel Kirby in Birmingham where they were married at St Mathias Parish Church on 19 February 1917. In September 1919 she accompanied him and one child on the SS Prinz Ludwig to Australia. They settled in Sydney, also changing the family surname from 'Sam' to 'Sams', and Henry Herbert became a grocer, appearing on the 1930 and 1936 Electoral Rolls at 45 Royal Street, Maroubra.

I wonder what reception these English war brides had on their arrival in Australia? Given the death of some 60,000 Australian males in the Great War, new females from Britain (and elsewhere) were seen as unwelcome competition for Australian girls, and many of the war bride troop ships were met at the docks by hostile crowds of local females. Although intermarriage between Chinese-Australians and white European women had occurred since the days of the gold rushes, the status of such women in a predominantly white and racially intolerant Australia was somewhat precarious. There may be some accounts in their letters home to their parents in Britain of what the Mrs Ah Gee, Gook and Sam experienced but, sadly, if these once existed, they are not in the public domain.

The book by Morah Loh is *Dinky-Di: the contributions of Chinese immigrants and Australians of Chinese descent to Australia's defence forces and war efforts 1899-1906*. Published by the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989.

If you know of a war bride of a Chinese-Australian Alastair would love to hear from you. He is also very keen to find some pictures of these couples.