

Private Alexander Sast

Unbroken silence

The strong smell of ammonia permeated the nostrils of the unconscious form suspended from the ring attached to the ceiling. The Digger stirred in response, roused by the smell and the excruciating pain in both arms and shoulder joints.

Grabbing a handful of hair, the enemy officer jerked the soldier's head upright and snarled, 'Are you ready to answer our questions yet?'

Russian-born Alexander Sast was no stranger to military service. After completing his training as a fitter with the Government Railways in Odessa, he enlisted in the Russian Navy and served for five years in the Baltic Fleet.¹

Yearning for a better life, he left the Navy and made his way to Australia. With his years of experience as a seaman, he readily found work on a coastal steamer on the Adelaide–Melbourne run. Proud of his new homeland, and with no desire to return to his native Russia, Sast applied for and was granted naturalisation as an Australian citizen; at the same time he adopted a new religion, that of the Church of England.¹

The outbreak of World War 1 found Sast in his home port of Adelaide. The city was gripped in a frenzy of war fever as men of all callings flocked to the recruiting depots. Alex was quick to join them and proudly presented himself to the enlistment officer with a curt, 'I serve Australia now'. Alex was allocated the number 919 and posted to 'C' Company, one of the sub-units of the newly formed 10th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force.¹ The 10th was raised within weeks of the declaration of war and was sent overseas some eight weeks after its formation. Following a brief stopover at King George Sound in Albany, Western Australia, the battalion sailed to Egypt, arriving in early December. The men then spent weeks training in the hot, dry desert conditions at Mena.



Dawn was just breaking as the oars rippled the still waters of the Aegean. As the landing boat nudged the stony beach, its human cargo of khaki-clad Diggers clambered over the sides, their boots and woollen tunics suddenly heavy with seawater, slowing their efforts to rush the beach.

A single rifle shot broke the silence—the Turks were now aware they were being invaded by a hostile force. Scrambling awkwardly under the weight of a full pack and waterlogged uniform, Sast headed for the relative safety of the cliffs overlooking the beach.

The officers struggled to make sense of maps which bore no resemblance to the terrain of the place where they had just landed. As the bombardment of enemy

fire directed at them from the rugged hillside above the cove intensified, they realised they had a choice: they could stay on the beach and be slaughtered, or find cover in the gullies and rocky outcrops above them. No-one hesitated when the order was passed to move up the ridge.

While storming the steep slope, Sast continually had to dodge the bodies of dead and wounded mates as they tumbled towards him. It was like a nightmare; all around him were not only men of his own unit, but also those of its sister battalions, the 9th and 11th, all with one objective: to find cover and prepare to give 'Johnny Turk' a taste of his own medicine.

The men of the 10th pushed further and further inland. With fixed bayonets, they stormed over machine-gun nests and charged through the Turkish positions. By the end of the first day, they had gained the most ground of all the ANZAC units but were now in danger of being cut off. At nightfall they withdrew just far enough to straighten the line and thus consolidate their position. Then came the order, 'Dig in!'

Sast took stock of the events of his first day at war—the scramble to reach the shore under a hail of bullets, the do or die charge up the slope, the sight of his first dead Turk, and the trauma of seeing killed and wounded mates falling all around him. What a horrendous time it had been.

Alex soon adapted to life in the trenches. In those first few days of pandemonium following the landing, he learned very quickly that survival depended on keeping his head down and being constantly alert.

On 28 April he was assigned to a water-carrying party. The party's task was a dangerous one as the entire area it would be traversing was under constant surveillance from the enemy. Alex said a prayer as he made his way to the beach with as many water bottles as he could carry. With the full containers slung over his shoulders, he set off on the hazardous return trek up the rugged slopes to the forward trenches.

Suddenly, he heard the crack of a rifle and felt a sharp, burning pain penetrating his foot. Instinctively, he dropped to the ground and crawled to the nearest cover. Blood was gushing from the bullet hole in his boot. Fumbling with the laces in his haste to staunch the bleeding, he removed his boot and bound the gaping wound with a shell dressing from his pack. Using a large branch for support, he carefully and painfully made his way to the hospital tent on the beach.

The damage to Sast's foot was quite serious—enough to warrant his evacuation for treatment, firstly to Lemnos and then to the 1st Australian General Hospital in Cairo.¹ Two months later, Alexander Sast was pronounced fit for duty and subsequently returned to his unit on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Late in the afternoon of 18 June 1915, the 10th Battalion was involved in a confrontation with the enemy—the task of the battalion to hold the vital right flank of

the 3rd Brigade. A Turkish sniper, who was systematically picking off the men in the trenches, was hampering the battalion's movements. Frustrated and fed up with being pinned down by the lone gunman, a corporal yelled, 'Someone get out and drop that bloke!'

Without hesitation or thought for his own safety, Sast grabbed his rifle and crawled over the lip of the trench. He advanced about 30 metres, then waited in silence for the Turk to reveal his location when he fired his next shot. Alex didn't have long to wait.

As the Turk fired, Sast pinpointed his position about 50 metres away. During the ensuing duel, which was to last for the next five hours, Sast fired many rounds at the enemy sniper without success.

At about 11.30 pm, a barrage of machine-gun and rifle fire bombarded the front, leaving Sast trapped in no man's land. Suddenly, an enemy shell exploded about 25 metres from where he lay unprotected on the open ground, discharging a piece of shrapnel into his left leg. The Digger rammed his thumb into the hole, trying to stem the flow of blood.²

He called to his mates for help, but his cries were drowned out by the incessant noise from the guns and bullets. As the firing subsided, Alex again called for help. Just as he thought his cries had been heard, he realised to his horror that the soldier approaching him—with bayonet fixed—wore a Turkish uniform. Panic stricken, the wounded Sast tried to crawl backwards and out of reach as the Turk raised his rifle and lunged at him with the bayonet. Defensively, Sast reached up and grabbed the blade as it flashed toward him, gashing his fingers on the sharp edges. He pleaded with the Turk to spare his life, pointing to his wounds in his bid for mercy. To Alex's relief, his captor cautiously lowered his rifle, then called for assistance to carry Sast back to the Turkish trenches. Alex was placed under guard until a doctor—with an unmistakable German accent—arrived some time later.

Once his wounds had been dressed, Sast was blindfolded and taken by covered wagon to a railway station where he was roughly thrown into a goods carriage. After a painful, six-hour journey by train, followed by another short wagon ride, Sast arrived at a makeshift hospital where he underwent surgery to remove the jagged shrapnel splinter from his leg. Except for two or three Frenchmen, Sast was the only other Allied soldier in the hospital; the rest of the patients were Turks.

Questions, questions, questions came to dominate Sast's existence. Soon after the surgery, he was subjected to hours of interrogation by his captors. Again and again he refused to divulge information about his battalion or the brigade.

Nineteen days after his capture, Sast was moved to the town of Scutari. On his arrival he was dragged into a detention room in a remote part of the camp. He was again questioned about his unit—once more he refused to answer.

With his hands tied behind his back, Sast was hung by his arms from a ring attached to the ceiling, his toes not quite touching the floor. The Digger screamed in agony, his shoulder joints straining unbearably to take the full weight of his suspended body.

Pain-induced unconsciousness did not save Alex from the excruciating punishment. Each time he passed out, the Turks would revive him with smelling salts and ask the same questions over and over again. Sast endured the torture for four days, but not once did he provide his captors with the information they demanded.

It was soon clear to the Turks that, regardless of how much pain he was made to suffer, the Digger was not about to talk, and, much to Sast's relief, he was transferred to a prison compound.²

About 250 prisoners of various nationalities, including a number of Australians, occupied the prisoner of war camp. The prisoners were forbidden to speak to one another, but whenever the guards' backs were turned, they seized the opportunity to compare notes on their capture and treatment.

The prisoners were forced to work from six in the morning until six at night, carrying bags and timber, subsisting on a meagre ration of tea, bread and tasteless stew.

In December 1915, Sast and a number of other prisoners were transferred to a German prison camp in Bulgaria, where they were forced to dig ditches from sun-up to sundown. During this time, Sast made friends with a Bulgarian soldier who was eager to escape. Sast had managed to conceal 22 sovereigns inside his belt and carry them without detection throughout his captivity. He wasted no time informing his newfound friend that he had sufficient money to fund their escape.²

By the time the scrape beneath the barbed wire was deep enough for them to crawl to freedom, their fingers were numb and blue from digging in the snow. Once outside the compound, the pair stole a horse and cart and headed for the River Danube.

As soon as they had put some distance between themselves and the camp, they dumped the cart and made their way across country on foot, hiding out in barn lofts by day and travelling by night until they finally reached the banks of the frozen Danube. The plan was to make their way downstream by jumping onto one of the slow-moving barges that plied their way along the mine-strewn river.

As the pair crossed the ice towards the shipping channel, they were spotted by a sentry who fired three shots at them as they sprinted across the frozen waste. They escaped to a village where they agreed that they would have more chance of avoiding capture if they were to separate.

Sast bought some civilian clothes and boarded a coach for Bucharest. Here he met two Russians, one of whom had served in the Russian Navy. They travelled together till they reached the heavily fortified Russian border, where in a local cafe, Sast made contact with a Jewish man who specialised in smuggling people over the border. In return for £1, the gentleman guaranteed the Digger safe passage.

Travelling on false papers, Sast made his way into Russia. When he reached the seaport of Archangel, in northern Russia near the Arctic Circle, he reported to the local British authorities that he had successfully escaped from the Turks and requested passage to England to rejoin his unit.²

When he arrived in England, Sast expected a hero's welcome. Instead he was placed under arrest as a deserter. Again—questions, questions, questions. During an interrogation session concerning his exploits as an escapee, an officer touched on a delicate subject, the fact that Sast had relatives living in Russia. The Digger exploded. He agreed that he had two sisters living somewhere in Russia but he didn't know where. Alex also agreed he had a brother who was—or had been—serving in the Russian Army, but who had failed to answer several letters that Alex had written to him before his capture.³

At the subsequent court of inquiry, the authorities tried to clarify Sast's claims, but found a number of anomalies. The first was that, on the day of Alex's capture, the 10th Battalion was on the *right* flank of the brigade not the *left* flank as Sast's

Sast's epic journey. The straight line distance from Gallipoli to Archangel is just under 3000km.



testimony suggested. Secondly, the corporal who had sent Sast to eliminate the sniper had been evacuated from Gallipoli due to illness well before Sast's capture. However, the most damning piece of evidence was that Alex's return to Gallipoli from the Cairo hospital had never been documented. To the Australian authorities, he had simply vanished from the face of the earth.¹

Sast was furious. 'How do you explain these?' he cried, showing the scars on his hand and leg. A medical officer was summoned to examine Alex but his findings could neither refute nor corroborate the Digger's claim.

Sast was released on conditional parole—to be watched every minute. When the court reconvened, Sast again insisted that the information he had provided was true and correct. The court re-examined the records and ruled that Sast should be cleared of any wrongdoing and accepted that he had, in fact, successfully escaped from Turkish custody.³

Sast returned to active duty and was posted to the 3rd Division Ammunition Sub Park. He was one of the first Australian soldiers to successfully qualify to drive the giant caterpillar tractors which were used to haul large quantities of ammunition and the heavy guns to the front lines.

Sast was by no means a saint during his remaining service and ran foul of his superiors on numerous occasions—in particular for being absent without leave, breaking camp and frequenting 'entertainment' venues in the out-of-bounds areas of a number of French and Belgian villages. Many such visits resulted in prolonged periods in hospital for the treatment of venereal disease.¹

Alex returned to Australia in September 1918 and drifted into obscurity, like so many of Australia's unsung heroes. He was one of only two Australians who had managed to escape from Turkish custody during the Great War. The other was Captain TW White, of the Australian Flying Corps.⁴

It must be noted that the standard decoration awarded to all other soldiers (rather than officers) who successfully escaped from an enemy POW Camp was the Military Medal. Alexander Sast received nothing.

Author's note: I wish to thank Lieutenant Commander Swinden, RAN, for his assistance in highlighting and bringing to my attention the exploits of Alexander Sast.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 919 Private A. Sast
- 2 AWM30, Prisoner of War Statements, 1914–1918 War, Private A. Sast
- 3 AIF Court of Inquiry into disappearance of Private A. Sast
- 4 AWM IDRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, Missing and Wounded Enquiry Bureau