

ITALIAN LINKS
WITH
KITCHENER'S HUNDRED

by John C. Trinca

Among the doctors who answered the urgent call from the British War Office for volunteers to join the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) in World War I were two descendants of Italian migrants, namely Cyril Checchi and Alfred John Trinca. These men became members of a select group which later came to be known as Kitchener's Hundred. The story of Kitchener's Hundred has been told recently in 'Chiron', the Journal of the University of Melbourne Medical Society.

Field Marshall Lord Kitchener became head of the War Office shortly after the declaration of war between Great Britain and Germany on 4 August 1914. Despite the predictions of most military and political strategists that the war would be over by Christmas, Kitchener thought otherwise and began planning for a large army to be built up over a period of three years. However, by the end of November 1914, the war had reached a perilous stage for the allied forces which had suffered catastrophic losses in the early battles in Belgium and France. At the beginning of 1915 it became apparent that Britain could not sustain adequate medical services for both its expanding army and its civilians without help from the Dominions.

On 8 February 1915, the British War Office dispatched a cable to the Australian Defence Department requesting one hundred medical practitioners as soon as possible for service with the RAMC in Europe. The Minister for Defence appealed through the lay and medical press for volunteers while the universities agreed to bring forward the examinations for final year medical students so that they could be available for immediate service on graduation. The response to the call was dramatic, especially at the Alfred Hospital, where the Medical Superintendent and three of the four Resident Medical Officers (RMO) resigned in the course of a week to join the RAMC. At the Melbourne Hospital two of its ten RMOs, namely Cyril Checchi and Harold Dew, sought, and were granted, leave of absence in order to join the RAMC - only three weeks before their term of office was due to expire at the end of April.

Checchi and Dew were among the group of

twenty RAMC recruits, including Alfred John Trinca, who left Melbourne in the S.S. 'Orontes' on 14 April 1915. Trinca had recently returned from Sydney having seen service in the RAN as surgeon to the Hospital Ship 'Grantala' which took part in the capture of Rabaul in September 1914.

Cyril Checchi was the son of Ettore Checchi, a distinguished engineer and surveyor with the Victorian State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, who migrated from Florence,



Ettore Checchi with his guitar in retirement.

Tuscany, in 1874. Another son, Leo, eighteen months older than Cyril, also became a doctor. Leo had the misfortune to suffer a serious head injury when struck by a flying stump while watching a cricket match as a schoolboy at Brighton Grammar. His life was endangered and he was ill for many months. The point of the stump

embedded in his skull and penetrated his brain. His powers of concentration were affected and his schooling was interrupted. To conceal the wound Leo, ever after, kept his hair plastered over the depression left in his skull.

The Checchi brothers enrolled as medical students at the University of Melbourne in 1909, but Leo was unable to pass second year and left the university. Not revealing his head injury, Leo Checchi enlisted in the AIF in 1915, was commissioned lieutenant and served with the 21st and 38th Battalions until demobilised in June 1918. He was badly gassed in France. When stationed in Egypt, he met by chance his brother Cyril when the latter happened to swim across the Suez Canal one day. After the war Leo resumed his medical studies at the University of Melbourne, but his health could not tolerate the city dust and summer climate and he was again unsuccessful. He then went to Edinburgh University where he completed the medical degree. Leo Checchi spent the rest of his life as a general practitioner in Wales. He

died after contracting pneumonia when going out to treat patients during a particularly severe winter spell. He was nearly 90 at the time of his death.

Alfred Trinca was the son of John Andrew (Giovanni Andrea) Trinca, who was born in Grosotto, Lombardy, in 1844, emigrated in 1863 and was a pioneer sawmiller and builder in Gippsland. Alfred's younger brother, Francis Louis (Frank) Trinca, also graduated in Medicine at the University of Melbourne. He enlisted in the AMMC in 1916, served in Mesopotamia where he was awarded the Military Cross "for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. During an attack this officer, although suffering from fever, carried out his duties with great energy and total disregard of danger. Later, he accompanied the troops in a counter-attack, attending to casualties in the open under fire, and setting a fine example of endurance." After the war Frank Trinca was in general practice in Caulfield before specialising in rheumatic disease in Collins Street.

To return to Kitchener's Hundred. On 8 April 1915



The Trinca family at home in Lisson Grove. Brothers Alfred and Francis became doctors.

the Director-General of Medical Services announced that the selection of one hundred medical men for the RAMC had been completed. Although the rank and conditions of service offered in the RAMC were inferior to those pertaining in the corresponding Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), Cyril Checchi and Alf Trinca deemed it an honour to have been selected for service in the British Army. Cyril Checchi recalled the voyage on the 'Orontes' as one of luxury without any of the usual wartime restrictions. The vessel

knew what to do with them. Eventually the Australian Agent-General found them accommodation. They were given one week's leave, during which time they were outfitted with uniforms. They then went to the RAMC training unit at Crookham, near Aldershot, and some were fortunate enough to be billeted in private homes near the camp. The training was strict - drill starting at 6 a.m., route marches, horse riding classes at the Aldershot Riding School and numerous lectures, but no clinical work.

After completing his training in August 1915, Checchi was posted to a convalescent camp in Malta and then to No 17 Stationary Hospital at Cape Helles on the Gallipoli peninsula. He remained there until the evacuation of all allied forces in December 1915. After the return of his unit to Egypt, Checchi found he was the only Australian among the British and Canadian medical officers. A high-ranking officer wanted to appoint another Canadian to his position and Checchi was discharged from the RAMC after one year's service. He returned to Australia on the "Runic" and re-enlisted in the AAMC. However, Checchi's service with the RAMC was not recognised by the Australian Army authorities, with the result that he found himself inferior in seniority to men who had

ORIENT LINE.

Line of Messengers by

s.s. "ORONTES"

9,025 TONS.

F. S. SYMONS, COMMANDER.

FROM BRISBANE, 4th April; SYDNEY, 7th April;
MELBOURNE, 14th April; ADELAIDE, 16th April;
FREMANTLE, 20th April, 1915.

The Hon. the RAJAH RAZA-	Sir DAVID HARDIE
GOPALA CHANDER OF MADRAS	Dr. L. H. HENDERSON
Mr. K. H. ADAMS	Mr. Alex. JARL
Mr. H. W. BENSLEY	Mr. V. A. JULIUS
Dr. W. A. H. BIRRELL	Mr. J. V. KEANE
Dr. BRENDE	Miss KEANE
Dr. W. A. BOWMAN	Mr. J. G. KIDD
Mr. A. T. BEENE	Mrs. KITE
Rev. Father BIRDREV	Mr. and Mrs. A. E. LEDGTON
Miss BIRCK	Mrs. LEE and child
Lieut. W. W. A. BURNS	Mr. NORMAN LESLIE
Mr. M. BUTLER	Mrs. H. LESLIE
Dr. G. C. BURY	Dr. W. C. MARSDEN
Mr. J. D. CAESON	Mr. and Mrs. McCOLL
Dr. CHECCHI	Mr. E. TREICHARD MILLER
Mr. E. J. COX	Dr. MOHLET
Miss G. E. COX	Mr. NATHAN
Rev. C. F. CUMMIS	Dr. W. S. NEWTON
Mr. Luigi de MARCIA	Miss C. NICHOLAS
Dr. H. P. DEW	Mr. and Mrs. W. NICHOLSON
Mrs. ELLIOTT	Rev. Father O'DONNELL
Mrs. EGMAN and child	Miss P. OXTON
Mrs. EVAN and maid	Capt. H. PETER
Mrs. P. W. N. FARQUHARSON	Dr. PONSFORD
Miss FORREST	Dr. PITCHARD
Mr. and Mrs. H. FERRIS	Mr. W. J. REID
Dr. T. E. GEORGE	Dr. W. ROGERSON

Alf Trinca and Cyril Checchi on the 'Orontes'.

was unescorted but encountered no enemy attack during its six weeks, 12,000 miles trip from Melbourne to Plymouth. The 'Orontes' was in the Mediterranean when the Gallipoli landings took place. Alf Trinca was elected leader of the twenty RAMC recruits. He acted as their spokesman and organised their inoculations against small pox and typhoid.

After disembarking at Plymouth, they travelled by train to London where they were not expected. There was no sense of urgency and nobody



Cyril Checchi in Medical Corps uniform.

joined up after him, who had seen no active service or were on the reserve list and had yet to undergo training. To add insult to injury, Checchi discovered, after the war, that he was not entitled to the Gallipoli Medal awarded to the members of the ANZAC force who served in the Gallipoli campaign. Eventually, after the lapse of sixty years Cyril Checchi was awarded the Gallipoli Medal, mainly through the efforts of Bruce Ruxton, President of the Victorian Branch of the RSL.

Alfred Trinca volunteered for service on 5 August 1914, the day after war broke out. At the time he

accompanying press announcement from the Melbourne 'Herald' states the Dr Trinca was chosen from fifty applicants. The 'Grantala' left Sydney on 30 September 1914 and joined the Australian navy vessels which took part in the capture of Rabaul two weeks later. The 'Grantala' then proceeded to the naval base at Suva, Fiji, where she remained until the defeat of the German Pacific fleet near the Falkland Islands in December 1914. After returning to Sydney the 'Grantala' was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government to search for the trawler 'Endeavour' which was missing on a voyage from Macquarie Island to Hobart. Alfred Trinca volunteered to



Alfred Trinca at work in his laboratory.

was Clinical Pathologist at the Alfred Hospital and Honorary Anaesthetist at the Melbourne Hospital. He was appointed naval surgeon to the hospital ship 'Grantala' which was being hastily fitted out in Sydney in preparation for the RAN attack on the German squadron which was believed to be in the vicinity of Rabaul. The

remain on board the 'Grantala' during this search, which was unsuccessful, but not without its dangers. Trinca's discharge in Sydney from the RAN coincided with Kitchener's call for one hundred medics. On his return to Melbourne Trinca lost no time in applying for appointment in the RAMC.



Alfred Trinca in the RAMC.

After completing the training course at Crookham, Trinca was posted to France with a field ambulance. Later, while serving at a casualty clearing station he was threatened with a court-martial for defying a British Army order prohibiting emergency surgery in the front line. Trinca, who always maintained that his first duty was to save lives and limbs, had seen wounded men die as a result of long delays in initiating definitive treatment. He continued to operate on the wounded and many lives and limbs were undoubtedly saved, but he was soon arraigned before a high-ranking board which included the head of the RAMC. Apparently, the latter was so impressed with A.J. Trinca's arguments that he ordered the proceedings to be stopped and he is believed to have remarked: "This man should be decorated, not castigated". As a result, new orders were promulgated permitting surgeons to perform emergency procedures at the front. After being wounded by shrapnel and suffering a severe serum sickness reaction from an anti-tetanus inoculation, Alfred Trinca was posted to No. 12 Stationary Hospital, Rouen. From

August 1916 to April 1918 he was Surgical Specialist at the Marseilles Stationary Hospital. Altogether, he served more than three years with the RAMC. However, neither this service with the RAMC nor his earlier service with the RAN has been recognised by Australian authorities. As a result his name and those of thirty-seven other Victorian members of Kitchener's Hundred are missing from the Honour Roll at the Shrine of Remembrance.

References:

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Cyril Checchi retired from medical practice in his 90s and still lives in country Victoria.