

PREMIER'S ANZAC SPIRIT PRIZE

2023

BISHAN HERA-SINGH

SX10032

By Mehar Bains, Saint Ignatius' College



Part A: Using a range of sources, research the experience of a South Australian service man or woman who served (Navy, Army, Air Force, Nursing or other service duties) during World War 1 and/or World War 2.

A soldier largely washed away in the Australian narrative of the Second World War; Private Bishan Hera-Singh in *Figure 1* was not your typical, celebrated South Australian-born soldier. Lacking in the tan skin, 'Aussie' roots, and the loudly courageous, rebellious demeanour of the 'Australian serviceman', Hera-Singh has come to define a population of quiet and labouring servicepeople that, while have not lived to see their names recorded on award lists, have toiled to see their impact on the grateful looks of comrades among them on the battlefield and the declarations of victory freeing their nation from the chains of warfare. Great lengths have been made to piece together the narrative of a soldier so contrasting to the image of the 'Great Aussie Soldier', yet so invisibly crucial in the freedom of our country.

Life Before War

Born on the 13th of January 1912, Hera-Singh was born and grew up almost 150 kilometres south of Adelaide in the Coorong town of Meningie - the South Australian coastal experience - with almost a dozen older and younger siblings. Hera-Singh grew up in that culture rarely discussed or acknowledged at the time; he was of half-Indian, half-British descent, and cross checked through *Figure 1*, an email account from Hera-Singh's great nephew, Garry Hera-Singh, described him as 'very dark-skinned'¹. It should be noted that the White Australia policy was still intact during much of Hera-Singh's life – racial prejudices and names such as 'half caste' were targeted at any with differentiating features during this period of Australian history.



Figure 1. Two photographs attached to Hera-Singh's Attestation Form with his service number. (Service Records)



Figure 2. A photograph of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion, Headquarters Company. (Virtual War Memorial Australia, n.d.)

Syrian Campaign and Ethnic Significance in War

Hera-Singh enlisted into the armed forces on the 5th of August 1940², at the age of 28 and a half years, with recorded experience as a labourer. Trained as a machine gun operator, he embarked to the Middle East with the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion in *Figure 2* – a South Australian raised battalion – on the HMT 'MM'.

¹ Hera-Singh, G. (2023). Interviewed by Mehar Bains, personal communication.

² Bishan Hera-Singh's Service Records

Upon arrival in Palestine, both Hera-Singh and the battalion were thrust into action: the Syrian campaign, one of the lesser acknowledged campaigns involving Australian troops, sought to protect Syrian and Lebanese territory from German occupation after the fall of France in the same year. Divisive strategy involving an Indian Brigade and a Free French Force was met with equal motivation by the underestimated Vichy French, and at the heart of this was the ignited spirit of the soldier, with the battalion's first casualties reported on the 14th of June 1941. A map shown in *Figure 3* details the terrain of the area with key locations for cover. The remainder of the year was spent in Syria after an armistice was put forward by the Vichy French and subsequently signed. Front-line soldiers such as Hera-Singh and his comrades were commended at the time by the British Secretary of State for War in *Figure 4*.

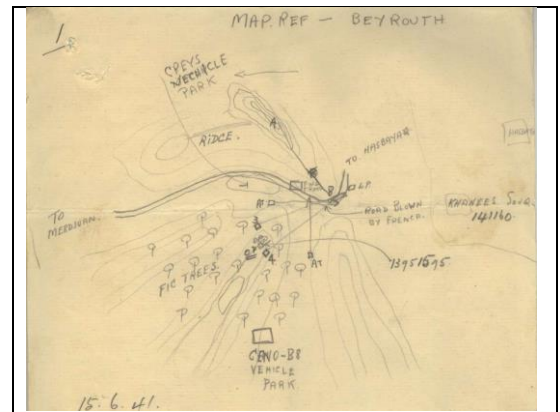


Figure 3. A map drawn by Allied powers of the French 'Beyrouth' (or Beirut) area in the Syrian campaign. Lines and arrows indicate opening charges by the Vichy French. (AWM52 8/5/3 - 2/3 Machine Gun Battalion)

In again noting Hera-Singh's direct lineage to his Punjabi roots, his dark-skinned appearance, and ethnic name, it is easy to assume his isolation from the rest of his soldiers – but soldier accounts³ show this not to be the case. History has lost a key aspect of the cross-cultural fight for Western freedom; the extraordinary levels of camaraderie and dedication displayed by South Asian soldiers in bolstering a fight for a country actively discriminating against their people back home. Processes of assimilation for immigrants were still intact in 1940s Australia and while the Indian population were still able to enlist with proof of any European ancestry, they were still not fully considered citizens or protected on basis of racial discrimination under federal Australian law.

Role as a Cook and the Fight Against the Japanese

The 18th of February 1942 saw Hera-Singh and his fellow soldiers land in Batavia on the island of Java, ready to defend the island from Japan's war path which had already seized much of the Netherlands' East Indies. Hera-Singh had already been graded as a cook on the 14th of December 1941, giving us a clue to his character; as recognised by Adelaide-based District Catering Supervisor Cedric Stanton Hicks, ⁴'to improve the feeding and functioning of the army, it was necessary to get good soldiers to be cooks'. The increased standard of army cooks in the Second World War was attributed to recommendations sent by battalion

"The Secretary of State for War on behalf of the Army Council, on sending congratulations on the conclusion of the campaign in Syria, wishes the following message to be conveyed to the tps: 'Thank the tps from the United Kingdom, Australia and India and the Free French forces under your

comd for their gallantry and endurance in arduous fighting over difficult country. You will share my hope that never again will Imperial tps have to fire upon the brave soldiers of a recent Ally, nor the Free French Forces oppose their countrymen in battle. I mourn with you the losses you have suffered in this conflict unnatural but forced upon us!'

Figure 4. Secretary of State for War's comments on the Syrian campaign effort from troops. (AWM52 8/5/3 - 2/3 Machine Gun Battalion)

Must Hold Java To Save Australia

BATAVIA, Saturday.
There is still some concern here that the Allies may not be fully conscious of Java's strategic importance and may concentrate on building up a last defensive line in Australia instead of throwing everything into a determined bid to hold Java, which the Dutch are confident can be held if they get naval and air reinforcements.

Figure 5. An article detailing Australia's participation in the Java campaign and doubts surrounding this. (Sunday Times 1942)

³ P. Stanley, 'Die In Battle, Do Not Despair: The Indians On Gallipoli, 1915', West Midlands, England: Helion & Company Limited, 2015

⁴ J. Walpole, 'Food Fighters: AACC – 60th Anniversary', Army – The Soldier's Newspaper, 2008

leaders, even if such cooks were expected to partake in fighting alongside this task. Although an underrepresented job in the armed forces, the revived role of the cook in the Second World War was essential to fuelling soldiers and boosting moral – something Hera-Singh was clearly trusted to do in the kitchen and on the battlefield.

The 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion led and assisted many of the 3000 Australian troops on the island with around 30,000 other Allied forces, but this was still no match for the 40,000 Japanese troops on familiar soil. As shown in *Figure 5*, in this stage of the war, Japanese intentions regarding Australia were not fully understood and immense pressure was placed on Australian troops in Java to save their homeland from what was considered as an impending invasion. Hera-Singh and his comrades fought strongly until the last minute, where under the command of South Australian Brigadier Arthur Blackburn, the Allied forces surrendered as prisoners of war to the Japanese on the 8th of March after only two days of fighting.⁵

収容所 Camp	第 1 号 収容所	番 号 No.	第 1 号 収容所 1534
姓 名 Name	Hera-Singh Bishan ヘラ シン ビshan	生 年 月 日 Date of Birth	1912-1-13
國 籍 Nationality	Private 陸軍 兵	所 屬 部 隊 Unit	A.I.F. INFANTRY BATTALION
捕 虜 地 点 Place of Capture	爪哇	捕 虜 年 月 日 Date of Capture	昭和 17 年 3 月 7 日
父 の 名 Father's Name	Hera-Singh Fack	母 の 名 Mother's Name	Hera-Singh Fack
本 籍 地 Place of Origin	ADELAIDE South Australia	職 業 Occupation	調理 長
通 報 先 Destination of Report	Hera-Singh Fack (Father) 201 BOWEN STREET ADELAIDE South Australia	特 記 事 項 Remark	

National Archives of Australia NAA: A14171: SX10032

Figure 6. A Japanese document with details of Hera-Singh as a Prisoner of War (National Archives of Australia)

Prisoner of War under Japanese Powers

Hera-Singh was reported 'Missing in Action' in Java and reported as a missing Prisoner of War, later recovered from the Japanese at Thailand on the 20th of August 1945 – more than three years after Hera-Singh's initial report as a missing Prisoner of War on the 7th of March 1942. Figure 6, a primary source from Japanese records, shows Hera-Singh most likely working on the Thai-Burma railway with much of his battalion. This

railway has come to epitomise the labour and struggle of over 12,000 Australian prisoners of war, and the precursor to thousands of fatalities. Ex-prisoner of war on the Thai-Burma Railway Bart Richardson stated in an interview, 'we'd be [labouring] all day. We'd be up in the dark.'⁶ This account and similar research from the Australian War Memorial⁷ supports another account about Bishan Hera-Singh from great-nephew Garry Hera-Singh; that darker skinned soldiers were delegated worse tasks in the camps by the Japanese, with Bishan Hera-Singh also allegedly stating that if the war had gone on another six months, he would not have survived the conditions of the camp⁸. This highlights the lack of respite provided under Japanese confinement, and the immense will and strength needed by soldiers such as Hera-Singh to hold onto the light of freedom after years of conflict, and now fatal labour under foreign oppressors – his presence is indicative of a larger symptom of warfare: the inhumane imprisonment of the soldier, and the inner, true Australian will to simply *survive* in the face of violence and death.

⁵ Australian War Memorial Authors, '2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion', Australian War Memorial, Australia

⁶ Australian Department of Veterans' Affairs, 'Bart Richardson – Thai Burma Railway', YouTube, 2020

⁷ Dr P. Stanley, 'Great in Adversity: Indian Prisoners of War', Journal of the Australian War Memorial, Australia, 2002

⁸ Hera-Singh, G. (2023). Interviewed by Mehar Bains, personal communication.

Recovery and Life After War

Hera-Singh disembarked from Moretown Bay as found in *Figure 6* and ‘shared a meal with relatives and friends’ at the Wayville camp before returning to his mother and siblings in

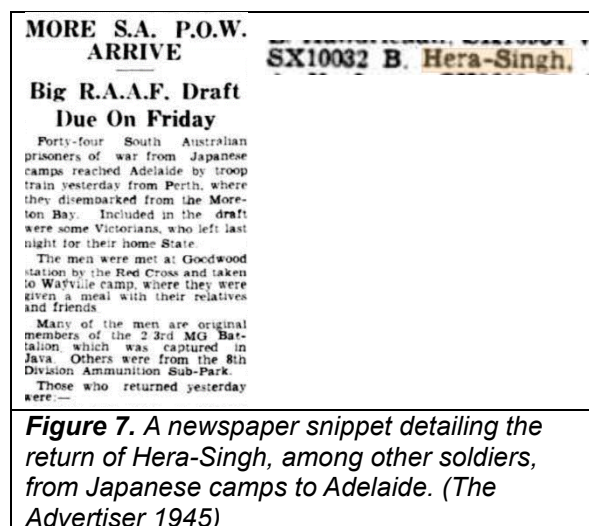


Figure 7. A newspaper snippet detailing the return of Hera-Singh, among other soldiers, from Japanese camps to Adelaide. (The Advertiser 1945)

Adelaide. Receiving the 1939/45, Pacific and Burma stars, as well as the Defence, War, and A.S.M medals, Hera-Singh also married Elaine Hera-Singh (born McDiarmid) and raised a family. He passed away on the 7th of June 1984 at the age of 72 in South Australia, and his name is recorded on the Ballarat Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial.

Hera-Singh’s story is not and may never be demonstrative of ANZAC qualities in the traditional sense. Yet the supposed erasure of him from history is precisely why he is representative of **mateship**, **courage**, and **determination** – the lack of widespread attention is what ties him to the hundreds of

thousands of Australian soldiers working the backgrounds of the Second World War. Mr Garry Hera-Singh provided a recount of Bishan Hera-Singh’s experience of severe malnutrition and suffering from debilitating health after his time as a prisoner⁹, and his will and perseverance to not submit total sickness– an account representative of so many other Australian prisoners of war. The masses of soldiers who submit their lives and youth to a greater cause is definitive of a greater ANZAC spirit: one of continuing to defend one’s country, people, and comrades without recognition of feats and encouragement.

Hera-Singh was born as what was considered an anomaly in Australian culture - half-Brown, half-White - yet he chose to demonstrate **connection** to Australia in simply enlisting, further mateship and perseverance in supporting his battalion in the kitchen and on the field and toiling away despite atrocities in Japanese camps with a fiery hope of freedom fuelled by Australian camaraderie. In seeing violent conflict spark around the world, from Ukraine to Afghanistan, there is a lesson on indomitable spirit to be learnt in Hera-Singh’s story: ANZAC spirit does not begin nor end with plunges into darkness and enemy lines, rather, it is the culmination of every serviceperson’s years-long march and ever straight posture that defines what it means to be Australian.

Word Count: 1497

⁹ Hera-Singh, G. (2023). Interviewed by Mehar Bains, personal communication.

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Part B: How did you gather the evidence about your individual in order to tell their story? In your response, explain the process you undertook when researching your individual.

My motivation behind researching Private Bishan Hera Singh stemmed from Indian representation in the Australian army, and as a South Asian myself, I found myself coming back to Hera-Singh's roots in my home state of Punjab and his experience of growing up between two cultures such as myself. It has always been difficult to see much of myself in the faces of Australians fighting in WWI or WWII, so I believed this to be somewhat proof of an existence of diversity in the 2nd AIF. A quick check at the National Archives of Australia and the Virtual War Memorial saw little previous research done for Hera-Singh, leaving me with a beautifully blank slate to develop his story on. But in starting his research, I faced an imminent realisation; that Hera-Singh in fact left little trace of himself in war records and unit diaries outside of his own service record. I even considered switching servicepeople due to the lack of surface level information on Hera-Singh but was ultimately motivated to dig a little deeper.

In doing so, I consulted the Australian War Memorial in any records they may contain with mention of his name, and I was met with little in the database, other than basic information regarding his service number and rank. In utilising his service record, I found him to be stationed all over the world with his battalion and used key dates and locations to construct a folio, or timeline of his journey throughout WWII. While he was rarely mentioned explicitly in records, I was encouraged to look further into unit diaries and the AWM's/VWMA's photograph and information database to piece together Hera-Singh's travels and fights in terms of his battalion and comrade – I can only describe it as constructing a jigsaw puzzle with the silhouette of a central figure missing, yet every outline and crevice of said figure solved to precision. After further use of interviews from Thai-Burma Railway survivors and contact with some of Hera-Singh's ancestors – discussed later - , it was possible to build his narrative from the ground up, with an emphasis on external help from resources such as Trove and the State Library of South Australia, where I enquired on a school visit.

I contacted a man by the name of Mr Garry Hera-Singh, a fisherman from the Coorong, where my soldier was also reported to have lived, in hopes of any information that could be provided. I received a response where Hera-Singh described himself as my soldier's great nephew and provided absolutely invaluable personal memories and accounts passed down from family members about my soldier's wartime experience. His contact has been vital to crosschecking and supporting personal stories to add to my soldier's narrative.

Ultimately, in breathing life into a forgotten soldier's story, the claim of 'ANZAC' spirit took on a whole different meaning, from valour to labour, ultimately redefining my idea of what the 'ideal Australian soldier' was.

Word Count: 486