

# The Maria Theresa Thaler and Ethiopian Mission 101 of 1941



The Maria Theresa Thaler dated 1780 the last date which is still struck on every coin minted today. Photos Frank C. Muller. Images Wikimedia.

THE service record of the No.1 (Australian) Operational and Intelligence Centre is given its due recognition in the book *Mission 101* by Duncan McNab. This fascinating book was drawn to my attention by a reader from the NSW North Coast, in particular because of the numismatic reference to the Maria Theresa Thaler (MTT) which was used to finance the expedition. A quarter of a page is given to describing the supply and transportation of a quantity of MTTs to the Australians while they were travelling in the back blocks of Ethiopia\* and leading a section of the Abyssinian\* irregular troops.

There is just one comment regarding the mission in the Official Australian War History. This being a single sentence in a footnote in Gavin Long's *To Benghazi*, which concerned a Brigadier Daniel. A. Sandford, military and political advisor to Emperor Haile Sellasie in 1941. Sandford and Major (later Major General) Ord C. Wingate organised the irregular force of Abyssinians to rebel against the occupying Italian forces.

Mission 101 consisted of several Operational and Intelligence centres staffed by teams of the Allied forces from different countries, the Australians being the first and most successful.

## No 1 Operational & Intelligence Centre

This unit was staffed by five young Australians who led a force of 200 Abyssinians into the region of Gojjam to help incite rebellion against the Italian occupation that followed the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935/36. These Australians were all drawn from 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment Australian Artillery. Leading them was Lieutenant Allan H. Brown NX 329, who was a bank officer before enlisting in December 1939. He served in the Middle East from January 1940 until August 1942, then in New Guinea with 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment, where he assumed administrative command of 2/1 Australian Field Regiment. He was awarded a Mention in Despatches (MID) in 1943 and an OBE in 1947 for meritorious service in Abyssinia, Buna-Sananda and Wewak. Brown was seconded to Mission 101 on 19<sup>th</sup> October 1940 until 5<sup>th</sup> November 1941. He was discharged in May 1946 with the rank of major.

The other members of the team consisted of Sgt William R. Howell NX3332, a station overseer in Rockhampton Queensland before enlisting in October 1939. He served with the 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Regt. overseas in January 1940, and was detached for service with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Corps on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1940. After service with Mission 101, he returned to his old unit before being promoted to Lieutenant in December 1941 and posted to the 2/9<sup>th</sup>



Infantry Battalion. He was killed in action on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1942 in New Guinea and was buried at Cape Endiaderre war cemetery and later re-interred in the cemetery at Bomana, Port Moresby.

Another member of the 101 Mission was Sgt Ronald C Wood NX3176. Previously a rubber planter in New Guinea, he was "between jobs" when he enlisted in October 1939. Posted to 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Regt. for overseas service in January 1940, he was promoted sergeant the following October and detached to 1 Australian Corps for service with Mission 101. On his return in January 1942, he was commissioned lieutenant in the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. He was discharged from 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion in July 1945.

The fourth member of the team was Sgt Edmund (Ted) M. Body NX3459, a grazier from Trangie NSW. He enlisted in October 1939 and was posted to 2/1<sup>st</sup> Field Regiment. He embarked for the Middle East in January 1940 and like the others he was detached for duty with 1 Australian Corps on 18 October of that year. He was later commissioned lieutenant and served with 2/1<sup>st</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion being discharged in July 1944. He received a MID for his distinguished service in the Middle East between February and July 1941. As a lieutenant, he was awarded a second MID in December 1943 for "gallant & distinguished services in the S.W.P. Area". In May 1944, he was medically re-classified and in view of his being a grazier it was recommended he return to the industry for a period of six to 12 months and he was discharged from the AMF in July 1944. He returned to Bundemar, the family property, near Trangie, and in 1953 took over from his father as stud master.

The fifth member was Sgt John Kenneth Burke NX717, who worked in the family business, one of the largest produce merchants in Australia, until he enlisted in October 1939. He was detached for duty with 1 Aust. Corps in October 1940 to serve with Mission 101. He was promoted lieutenant in December 1941 and served with "Z" Special Unit, 2/2 Infantry Battalion from August 1943 to February 1944. He was discharged in December 1945 from 2/2 Infantry Battalion. Ken, as he preferred to be called, excelled at sports during his school days. He played rugby union for Newcastle Wanderers as well as the NSW Waratahs and in 1929 was selected for both teams to play against the All Blacks. After the war his physical condition precluded his former active lifestyle.

### The Mission

Mission 101 was part of what was later known as Operation Gideon or Gideon Force, the name given to it by Ord Win-

gate, who had a fondness for all things Biblical. The aim of the operation was to be the advance party of the force that would reinstate the exiled Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie on his throne by means of a popular uprising inside the country. The Mission 101 operation has been described as possibly the first of the covert operations of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) that were to operate throughout the rest of the war.

The force was led by Lt Col Ord Wingate and assisted by Col Daniel Sandford. The Australians and their troops travelled over horrendous terrain while chasing the Italians, suffering repeated attacks of malaria, dysentery and dengue fever throughout the operation. They used night attacks and other commando tactics that they had been taught in Cairo. Their expedition commenced on December 26 1940 and ended in mid-May



Haile Selassie, Emperor of Abyssinia, with Brigadier Daniel Arthur Sandford (left) and Colonel Wingate (right) in Dambacha Fort, after it had been captured, 15 April 1941. Photo No 1 Army Film & Photographic Unit, Palmer F E (Lieut). Image Wikimedia.



Ethiopian men gather in Addis Ababa, heavily armed with captured Italian weapons, to hear the proclamation announcing the return to the capital of the Emperor Haile Selassie in May 1941. Photo Ministry of Information Second World War Official Collection. Image Wikimedia.



the following year, getting back to Cairo in early June. The Gideon Force was disbanded on 1 June 1941 having captured 1,100 Italian and 14,500 Ethiopian troops, 12 guns, many machine guns, rifles and ammunition and over 200 pack animals.

### Introduction of the MTT

The reference to the thalers by McNab in the book *Mission 101* reminded me about the trade coins of the world and the fascinating tales told about them and the MTT in particular. The MTT was widely accepted throughout the Middle East, where it was also known as the Levantine thaler.

Trade coins are a standard coinage (bullion of a known quality and quantity), usually silver, produced for those merchants dealing with different countries, principally China, the Middle East and South America, that needed a medium of exchange acceptable to all parties. Examples of such coins include the American trade dollar, Spanish 8 Reales from the Mexican Mint, the Japanese trade dollar, British trade dollar, the French piastre and Mexican peso and of course the one we are concerned with here, the Maria Theresa Thaler of Austria.

The Maria Theresa Thaler was struck from 1741 until 1780. After this date the thaler continued to be struck in the same weight and finesse, retaining the same date of 1780 and is still produced by the Austrian mint today for sale to collectors. Minted in London between 1936 and 1941 the Royal mint, with the agreement of the British Government, turned out more than 14 million. The Royal Mint also shipped dies to the Bombay Mint in India which produced over 18 million MTTs between 1940 and 1942.

McNab writes that the silver for the MTTs "...came from the mysterious cof-

fers of the SOE..." (Special Operations Executive) and a few hundred thousand pounds worth of coins were minted. The coins were dated 1764, which is a year that many thalers were struck at the Hapsburg mints situated at Hall, Gunzberg, Kremnitz and Vienna. Scholars have found that the MTT first became available in Ethiopia in 1769 at the coastal port of Massawa. The Abyssinians showed preference for the early dated thalers because of the attractiveness of the female portrait, in contrast to those coins struck after 1765 which showed Maria Theresa wearing the widow's veil, a portrait that was not as acceptable in the country. Since the death of the Empress in 1780, all MTTs have carried that date, which makes the use of early dies by the Royal Mint, an interesting attention to detail by the SOE, who arranged for the MTTs to be minted in Bombay.

An extremely important characteristic of the MTT is the raised lettering of the Empress's motto around the edge of the coin, "Justitia et Clementia" (Justice and Clemency). This raised edge prevents clipping or shaving of any silver from the edge, which would reduce its value, and pose added problems to any potential forgers.

The importance of the MTTs to the success of Mission 101 is illustrated by the continual reference to the coinage throughout the book. When the Australian operational centre was being launched, the list of items packed on the camels included "50,000 Maria Theresa talers for the occasional purchase, incentive or bribe." It was not long before the Australians who linked up with the patriots- local forces loyal to the Emperor "...gave both these chieftains (Mangasha and Negash) rifles, ammunition and some Maria Theresa thalers,

big silver coins worth approximately 1/10d". After a successful attack on Injibera, the first time the Australians engaged the enemy face to face in battle, Lt. Brown and Sgt. Burke went into the villages "to coerce the patriots and any locals into joining them...weapons ... and handfuls of silver MTTs were offered as incentives to sign on."

At the end of May 1941, and with Haile Selassie established on the throne, Brown, Burke, Body, Howell and Wood began to wrap up Mission 101's operational centre. Accounting for the expenses of his unit, Brown calculated that after six months travelling, fighting and inciting rebellion, they came to precisely £200 (2,186 thalers by my calculation at the conversion rate of 1/10d).

### An Australian spy in Ethiopia

Any in-depth reading of the actions of Mission 101 will reveal another Australian, Arnold Weinholt (1877-1940). Listed in the Australian Dictionary of Biography as an army officer, adventurer, pastoralist, politician and author, he was born in Queensland and enlisted in the 4<sup>th</sup> Qld Imperial Bushmen in 1900. He served in South Africa during the Boer War, he became manager of the Weinholt Estates in Queensland and entered politics in 1909 as member for Fassifern in the Qld. Legislative Assembly. In 1915 he sailed for Africa and served a period in the British South African Police and then in the East African Mounted Rifles. Early in 1916 he was seconded to the British Intelligence Branch and carried out a patrol into German East Africa resulting in his capture, he escaped six months later and was awarded the Military Cross. His further service resulted in him being awarded the Distinguished Service Order in 1918



Maria Theresa Thaler Dated 1741 first date of issue. Image courtesy of Town Hall Coins.

and a bar to his MC. Arriving back in Australia, he married and was elected to the House of Representatives as a National Party member for Morton Qld. He remained in federal or state politics until 1935 when he travelled to Addis Abba as a war correspondent for the Brisbane *Courier Mail*. Within two months, he had joined the Ethiopian Red Cross and upon the outbreak of WWII, he sailed to Aden and learned Arabic and Amharic, anticipating a commission in the British Army. In August 1940 he was ordered to travel overland from Sudan to Ethiopia with a small band of indigenous people, as part of Mission 101. Wienholt was ambushed on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September and was last seen crawling into the bush. A later expedition to find him only revealed some human bones at the last campsite and his assistants were unable to shed further light on his death.

Possibly the most interesting aspect of Weinholt's activities is that he is noted in the Australian War Memorial Commemorative Roll for WWII as a "Second Lieutenant, Service – Allied Forces, Unit: Military Mission 101, Died of Wounds, aged 62", and noted as being on the British Army General List. The National Archives of Australia file on him notes that the Imperial War Graves Commission wrote to Base Records, Canberra,

informing them of his WWI service in the British Army and his awards, as well as his Australian political career. Another sheet dated 1966 in the Archives notes 'Have a large file relative to Arnold Weinholt/a large file has been sighted by Crs Carroll + Wilson 25/2/66 and are satisfied Weinholt was never a member of the Aust. Military Forces' – another note says that the file was brought from Commonwealth War Graves by hand of one of their staff and taken back by her on 25/2/66. Several references to Weinholt remark on his frequent communication with British Military Intelligence from the time of his service in South Africa during the Boer War through to his death in Ethiopia in 1940.

There were six Australians including Weinholt, involved in Mission 101 and Operation Gideon in Ethiopia.

I find it surprising that the book by Duncan McNab was published only in 2011. The story of the Australian involvement in this operation during WWII and the influence it had on the opening of a second front in north-east Africa with the re-instatement of Emperor Haile Selassie to the throne are, to the numismatist, just window dressing to the fascinating story of the modern day use of the Maria Theresa thalers. Maybe the days of gold and silver are not over and

paper money too may still have a place in this modern electronic world.

*\*Abyssinia or Ethiopia? The country has been known by its inhabitants as Ethiopia since the 4<sup>th</sup> century and is Greek in origin, Abyssinia is the Arabic name given to the region, not commonly used since WWII.*

*Acknowledgment to Town Hall Coins for image of Thaler of 1741*

## References

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