

SIR CHARLES RYAN: A SURGEON TO THE TURKS

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The story of how and why Charles Snodgrass Ryan joined the Turkish Army and the adventures which befell him therein reads like a story from the Boys Own or G.A. Henty. In his day, the vista which opened to the young medical graduate was wide. He, and most graduates were men in those days, could travel to the ends of the Empire, serve the Raj in India in the Army or go to sea. How narrow and specialised are the present young medical graduate's options!

Charles Snodgrass Ryan was born in Killeen, Longwood, Victoria in 1853, the son of Charles Ryan, who migrated from Ireland to New South Wales and then overlanded to Victoria in the 1840s. Ryan was descended, on his mother's side, from Irish peers and the family were established members of the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland. They were within the Pale.

Ryan was educated at Melbourne Grammar School and entered the Medical School at Melbourne University. He did his first three years of the course in Melbourne and then went to Edinburgh to finish his final three years. Edinburgh was then one of the world's leading medical schools, famous for the names of such men as the Cunninghams, the Bells and Simpson. It is still a fine medical school.

After he graduated, Ryan was stuck for a job, when he noticed in the London *Times*, an advertisement for surgeons in the Turkish Army at 200 gold sovereigns per year. He applied and was accepted and after a leisurely and educational trip across Europe, he arrived in Constantinople in 1876 to time his arrival for one of the periodic confrontations between the effete and well nigh moribund Ottoman Empire and its traditional enemy, Russia.

In 1875, Herzegovina and Bosnia rose up against their infidel Turkish overlords, as did the Christian Bulgarians. The uprising was suppressed with the usual cruelty and brutality by the Turks, but the persecuted Slav Christian minority appealed to the great defender of the Slavs and their Orthodox church, Holy Russia.

To cap all this, Servia declared war on Turkey in 1876 and again a Slav state was threatened by the Moslems. The appeal to Russia was one which could not be gainsaid and there was an upsurge of

feeling of pan-Slavism or brotherhood with their persecuted brethren in the Balkans by the Russian people. Tsar Alexander II hated war and was loath to go to war against the Turks, but public and political pressure forced his hand. He declared war in April 1877.

There were certain geographical advantages for the Russian Empire in fighting the Turks. Turkish power could be further weakened, Turkish territory could be annexed and, in particular, the Russian Empire might obtain an opening to a warm water port through the Bosphorous, a desire of Russia down through the centuries.

In alliance with Rumania, large Russian forces crossed the Danube and invaded Bulgaria under the command of the Grand Duke Nicholas, the Tsar's brother. The smaller Turkish army commanded by Abdul Karem, an elderly but competent soldier, was slowly driven back after several pitched battles, leaving one fortified outpost, the City of Plevna, about 20 miles south of the Danube. Here 14,000 Turkish troops under Osman Pasha held out against the Russian and Rumanian forces for about five months.

One of the Turkish army surgeons in Plevna was Charles Ryan, who had already served in a Turkish army against the Servians in 1876. During his time in Plevna, Ryan had to treat hundreds of wounded Turks in very makeshift field hospitals and with the minimum of medical supplies and medical and nursing help. It is probably here, carrying out the mass amputations, which were a feature of continental surgery in the 19th Century, that he developed his snappy surgical skill.

He was obviously a very fast surgeon, as his student and later his junior surgeon, George Syme, who became first President of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons, has testified. Syme defended Ryan's technique, stating the obvious that he had learned to operate quickly under atrocious conditions during the 1877 war.

Ryan wrote a most interesting account of his experiences in the book, *Under the Red Crescent* and in his book he comments on the stoicism and indifference to pain of the Turkish peasant soldier.

Plevna withstood three mass attacks by the Russians and eventually succumbed to starvation, when an intelligent Russian General, Todleben, who had built the fortress of Sebastopol in the Crimean War, decided to starve the garrison out rather than to blow it out.

Whilst he was serving in the Turkish Army in Plevna, Ryan took part in a Turkish cavalry charge against superior Russian forces and narrowly escaped being captured. It is believed he is the only Australian surgeon to have ever had such an exciting experience.

Before the fall of the fortress, Ryan was ordered to escort wounded Turks in carts to Sofia, a journey of about 300 miles and of great misery for the wounded and of strain for the escort.

Ryan later went to Erzeroum, in the Caucasus, in the depths of winter, where an outbreak of typhus and typhoid killed more soldiers

than the fighting, a common story in war. Most of the doctors there, many of them English, died, and the dead were left for the dogs to devour because the ground was too hard for graves to be dug. Ryan recounts that his experiences in Erzeroum were the most horrifying that he ever underwent.

Ryan was captured by the Russians but they soon entertained him, as an armistice had been declared. They also entertained a friend of his, a Polish cavalry officer and soldier of fortune, Prince Czertwertinski, who had served in the Turkish army and whom the Russians had said they would cheerfully have shot as a turncoat if there had not been peace. This Polish gentleman, incidentally, came to Australia and taught school in Queensland and elsewhere, worked as a carter in Queensland, lived in Cooktown and really needs a full paper to himself.

On Ryan's return to Melbourne, after the war, he was naturally a figure of great public and professional interest and was dubbed Plevna Ryan because of his service in that fortress. His first operation at the Melbourne Hospital was attended by a concourse of surgeons (should that be a slash of surgeons?). Ryan's technique has already been mentioned. Another surgeon describes Ryan as brilliant, dashing and resourceful, prepared to do a speedy amputation, *Secundum Artem*, ready to relieve a strangulated hernia with a pocket knife and a piece of string. There was no doubt that his experiences as a military surgeon, already mentioned, may have engendered a perhaps not too careful technique.

Ryan set up in private practice in Melbourne and joined the staff of the Melbourne Hospital and later the Children's Hospital, as well.

In 1880, he treated Ned Kelly, who was wounded at Glenrowan by the police and he compared him unfavourably with the stoic and tough Turkish soldier. Ryan also made the shrewd, military observation that the Turkish soldier was particularly redoubtable and brave in defence, repulsing as he did three overwhelmingly superior Russian attacks on the fortress of Plevna and also fighting stoutly in other battles in the war. The Australians were to learn this quality of the Turks to their sorrow in 1915.

Ryan was evidently a pleasant and cheerful man, excellent company and a collector of various birds, which were stuffed and lined the walls of his surgery in Collins Street to glare balefully at his patients. He was Medical Officer to the Victorian Railways for many years and Turkish Consul. He served on in the Victorian militia and later in the Australian militia. Ryan was Principal Medical Officer, Third Military District, when World War I broke out. He was then appointed ADMS First Australian Division. In December 1914, he was transferred to Corps Headquarters staff and appointed Consulting Surgeon to the AIF.

Ryan was present at the landing at Gallipoli and he commented upon the appalling arrangements for medical evacuation and management in the early stages of the campaign. One so-called hospital ship to which he was attached had just been used as a horse transport and the risk of tetanus beggars the imagination.

In May, Major General Bridges, who commanded the First Division and who was the Commander of the AIF, was mortally wounded by a Turkish sniper with a bullet through his Profunda Femoris artery. Ryan later told his future son-in-law, R.G. Casey, who was Bridges' ADC, that he could have saved the General, a doubtful opinion, as blood transfusions were not in use in those early days.

During an armistice called by the Turks and the Australians to bury thousands of Turkish dead between lines, after an abortive Turkish attack on the Australians in May, the Turks were intrigued to see an Australian officer supervising the burial of the Turks and wearing the Plevna ribbon of 1877.

Later on, Ryan went to London where he was Consulting Surgeon to the Medical Boards of Review for Officers. Many tales were told later of his severity, some of them probably true. He returned to practice in Melbourne and died in 1926. He had been promoted to Honorary Surgeon General in 1917 and to Honorary Major General in 1919. In 1926 his daughter, Maie, married R.G. Casey who was born in Brisbane and whose antecedents lived in Newstead House.

Ryan's decorations included the KBE, CB, CMG and Fourth Orders of OSMANIEH and MEDJIDIE.

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