

ESSAYS

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'The Strange Career of Gottfried Hanskie: A German Convict on the Van Diemonian Frontier'

In his account of the "Wars, Extirpation, Habits etc." of the "Native Tribes of Tasmania", James Calder wrote:

Whatever the future historian of Tasmania may have to say of this ancient people, he will do them an injustice if he fails to record that, as a body, they held their ground bravely for 30 years against the invaders of their beautiful domains (1875, 73).

Although Keith Windschuttle refers to Calder's account in *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Vol. 1, this is a piece of advice that he does not take.

One of Windschuttle's aims is to prove that there was no warfare in colonial Van Diemen's Land. He argues that, rather than a military confrontation the outbreak of hostilities was triggered by the depredations of "Musquito, Black Jack and Black Tom", who were merely "bushrangers who happened to be black". They were "among a number of like minded criminals who took to the bush at roughly the same time and lived by pillaging the property of outlying settlers" (2002, 71)

If he seeks to demilitarise the indigenous side of the frontier he does much the same for the European. Thus, the man who played a prominent role in tracking down Mosquito, "Gottfried Hanskey", is described as a "settler" (Ibid., 71). In fact Hanskie (to call him by his most common appellation) was a serving convict who had only

just been released from Macquarie Harbour penal station after serving just two years out of what should have been a twelve year hard labour stretch. As it turns out, this officially sanctioned escape from the horrors of penal station life owed much to Hanskie's previous military experience and the uses to which that could be put.

As military careers go, Gottfried Hanskie's has to be one of the more unusual. He was born close to Berlin around about the same time as the first fleet landed in Australia. He lived, as he put it "with my friends" with never a thought of "becoming a soldier". That was until the defeat of Prussia in the disastrous 1806 campaign. In the following year he decided to join the hussars. His life, however, was turned upside down when in April 1809 his commanding officer, Ferdinand von Schill, rose up in rebellion against the French.

Schill had been one of the few Prussian officers to emerge out of the debacle of 1806 with any distinction. A second-lieutenant in the dragoons, he had been wounded at the battle of Auerstadt, but escaped to Kolberg where he played an important role in the siege of the city which held out against French forces. Schill commanded a *Freikorps* unit which raided behind enemy lines. Following the Treaty of Tilsit he was promoted to major and placed in command of a hussar regiment, raised primarily from those who had fought under his command at Kolberg. Other recruits, including Hanskie, joined from further afield, probably motivated by patriotic sentiment. Schill was a member of the *Tugendbund*, an organization that has been described as a "quasi-Masonic 'League of Virtue'" and he shared with many of the membership a belief that the recently created French puppet state, the Kingdom of Westphalia, was ripe for rebellion. Ruled by Napoleon's younger brother, Jerome, Westphalia had been patched together from an amalgam of smaller states and was seen as a symbol of French dominance in Germany. The outbreak of the War of the Fifth Coalition provided Schill with what he thought was his moment.

Keen to avenge its defeat in 1805 the Austrian Empire declared war on France with British support. Although initially promised help by Frederick William III, the Prussian King reneged on the deal before the conflict began. Despite the lack of continental allies the Austrian army took the field in April, invading Bavaria and late in the same month under the pretext of manoeuvres, Schill moved his regiment out of Berlin. Marching south he was joined by a number of officers and a company of light infantry. By the time he reached Wittenberg in early May he claimed to have 500 cavalry and 2000 infantry under his command. Turning north-west towards Westphalia he fought a successful engagement with the Magdeburg garrison at the village of Dodendorf on 5 May, although six of his officers and 83 other ranks were killed or wounded (Mustafa 2008, 71-114). As a result of this victory some Westphalian troops changed sides to join the rebellion. The net, however, was fast closing in. Around 8,000 Danish and Dutch troops under French command had been called in to contain the growing rebellion. Schill had also gained the ire of Frederick William III, who was anxious to disown his actions, fearful they might drag the Prussian state into another disastrous conflict with Napoleon. Driven north-eastwards, Schill was finally captured in Stralsund and the rebellion was comprehensively put down. Schill himself was killed in the street fighting. The captured officers and many of the Westphalian deserters were executed. The Prussian rank and file were condemned to service in the French Mediterranean galley fleet.

Hanskie was lucky in that he was taken early in the campaign. With 15 others he was captured at the engagement in the village of Dodendorf, possibly after being wounded – he later complained of being troubled by a broken collarbone. This was the same day as Jerome Bonaparte declared that Schill, not having the authority of the King of Prussia, was “in the situation of a pirate at sea who has no letters of marque” (The Times, 22 May 1809). This was a declaration that little in the way of mercy would be shown. Unlike

those taken at Stralsund, Hanskie was offered a choice of sorts. "Thrown into a dungeon" he was bluntly told that he could enlist with the French army or be chained to the oars of a galley. Unsurprisingly he chose to become an infantryman, was enrolled in a Dutch unit and marched to Holland.

Meanwhile things were not going well for the Austrians. After initial success in Bavaria they were driven back by the Grand Army. Anxious to provide some support, their British coalition partners tried to open up a second front by sending an expeditionary force to the island of Walcheren to invest the port of Flushing. Two and a half months after joining the French army, Hanskie found himself in the garrison of the beleaguered town. He promptly deserted, leaving his enforced service with the Emperor to join the 39,000 British troops that lay languishing amidst a swarm of mosquitoes (the French had opened the sluice gates to the dykes inundating much of the country; Beamish 1832, 226). Although Hanskie hoped to rejoin the cavalry, his new masters posted him to the second light battalion of the King's German Legion, a unit which played an active part in the assault on the city (Ibid., 236). Life as an infantryman proved far from pleasant. The mud in the trenches round the besieged town was knee deep and there was no fresh drinking water. There were few blankets and the cheap military issue shoes came apart at the seams in the wet (Ibid., 223 and 241). Although he was not among the nearly 16,000 British troops who contracted 'Flushing fever', a mixture of malaria, typhus, typhoid and dysentery, Hanskie found the endless drilling and excessive discipline hard to take (Howard 1809).

The King's German Legion had its origins in one of those accidents of dynastic history. As George III happened also to be the Elector of Hanover, he was titular head of the state's military forces defeated by the French in 1803. Large sections of the Hanoverian army were absorbed, however, into a new corps within the British army which rapidly grew to two regiments of cavalry, six infantry battalions and

five batteries of artillery. One of the legacies of its unconventional history was that discipline in the Legion was enforced through a mixture of British and Hanoverian procedures, as Hanskie was about to discover.

Like Schill's hussar regiment, the 2nd Battalion KGL Light Infantry was trained to operate as skirmishers. Clothed in green, the rank and file were expected to be reasonable marksman as well as being drilled in rapid reloading. Hanskie found both difficult. His broken right collarbone made it hard for him to be steady when he presented arms at the target and he found it awkward to perform, as he put it, "several motions of the infantry manual and platoon exercise". His platoon corporal was merciless, striking him with a cane. His treatment contrasted sharply with his experience of service in the Prussian hussars and Hanskie complained. Rather than be taken to see the commanding officer, as he had demanded, he was marched straight to the guardhouse. The following morning he was brought before his platoon commander, Lieutenant Meyer, and charged with insubordination. When he tried to protest the same corporal who had laid into him on the drill ground was ordered to come forward, given a stick and told to beat Hanskie once more. At the second stroke the stick shattered. A new one was produced and the punishment continued until he had received thirty strokes – enough the Lieutenant thought to thrash "any French tricks" or other republican notions out of his head.

Since the Austrians had by now been defeated there seemed little point in prolonging the disastrous Walcheren campaign and the remains of the British expeditionary force were evacuated in early December 1809 (Beamish 246). Thus it was that Hanskie found himself in the Sussex coastal town of Bexhill, the garrison base for the Legion. Although no longer on active service, Hanskie's troubles continued. The final straw came when Lieutenant Meyer upbraided him in front of the entire company. In a humiliating public rebuke he said, "if Major Schill had no better men than you with him, no

wonder that he did no good." From that moment on, Hanskie became the butt of ridicule and he resolved to desert.

On the night of 21 July 1810 he slipped out of the barracks in company with another disgruntled private, Christopher Beutler, who claimed to have been pressed into service against his will after he had secured a passage to Heligoland, a tiny British north sea possession in search of work. The two men headed for the beach where they took a small boat off the shingle and used this to clamber on board a lugger anchored about a quarter of a mile off shore. Having ridden with the Prussian cavalry, and slogged it out on the parade ground as an infantryman, Hanskie now turned his hand to seafaring. At this, however, he proved to be even more incompetent than he had been at firing practice.

The owner of the lugger, William Bennet, went straight to the guardhouse to enquire if there had been any desertions, and then onto the neighbouring town of Hastings to report the loss to the pilots there. He did not have high expectations of retrieving the lugger – the wind was fair for the French coast and as he put it "if either of them was anything of a sailor" they might cross the Channel "in a few hours." As it turned out, however, he need not have worried. As the pilot, Charles Landle, described it – the moment they saw the lugger they had no doubt that it was the missing vessel. "She had her mizzen hoisted for a foresail, and the foresail out as a main sail, and one of the men pulling at the sea oar, one of the sails was aback which arose from them not having any knowledge of what they were about". Far from making it across the Channel the two deserters had managed to merely drift down the coast. They were in fact taken six miles off Hythe Head. As the pilot continued: "when we first discovered her she was laying like a log upon the water, at the mercy of the sea."

As if this was not bad enough, Hanskie and Beutler now made a nearly lethal mistake. In the night they had become completely disorientated and thinking that the land that they now saw in front of them was the continent they shouted "France, France" enthusiastically as the pilot's boat came alongside. As soon as they

realised their mistake they quickly changed their tune, insisting that they wished to head for the coast of Holland and walk overland to Germany.

By now the two boats had attracted attention from another quarter. His Majesty's cutter *Racer* closed in on them. It had already seen the pilot's boat communicate with a ship and supposed that it had "had taken some men out of her who were liable to be impressed" and was now loading them onto the fishing lugger. As fisherman on the Channel coast were exempt from impressment this was a common ruse used to avoid the attentions of the press gang. The cutter closed in firing a shot to signal that it wanted the two boats to hove to. Mistaking the vessel for a French privateer, Hanskie and Beutler once more shouted "France, France". To be tried for desertion was bad enough, but desertion to the enemy was a charge that under the articles of war was punishable by death.

There were other reasons to suspect that Hanskie and Beutler would be shown little in the way of mercy. The French occupation of the continent had stemmed the flow of recruits into the Legion which had been forced, as a result, to accept many non-Hanoverians. Like Hanskie, many of these had come over from enemy units. Although the invasion threat had diminished there was still great suspicion of all foreigners in coastal communities. When the commanding officer of the KGL had first visited in Bexhill in 1804 he had reported that "the neighbourhood generally seems to look on us much as we do on Cossacks" (Hill, entry for 6 Aug 1804, 176). The Legion's recent recruiting history did little to ease the situation, especially when those recruits decamped with the property of the local inhabitants. As Lieutenant-Colonel Halkett put it in his opening comments to the court martial: "if this Crime was over looked" it will "perhaps justify reflections that have unjustly been cast upon us, as Foreigners, not to be depended upon".

It was Hanskie who saved the two men's necks. In their defence he

stressed the cruel and degrading nature of the punishments they had received – treatment which as he understood it was “forbidden in the British service at large and in particular in the Corps”. This had the court scrambling for the rule book. The situation was complicated as the Duke of York had stipulated that “German Discipline may be resorted to” in cases “not exactly qualified for a courts martial”. This gave authority for NCOs to use the stick on recruits, but there was a crucial caveat. The punishment had to be authorized by a commissioned officer who was to be held “responsible for any consequent injury to the health of the men”. It was clear that both Hanskie and Beutler had been beaten against regulations. Playing on his service with Schill for all it was worth, Hanskie turned his attention to the most serious charge – desertion to the enemy.

“We had no other intention” he argued “but of endeavouring to return to our country, our friends, and our homes”. The aim all along had been to try and head for Holland before attempting to reach Germany. This was an objective he argued, that they had every chance of attaining since once ashore, their language and appearance would have permitted them to blend in. Indeed why would they create suspicion “in a Country where no papers are demanded from Working People”? Besides, he claimed, “some of the Gentlemen of this garrison, nay in the very Court, ... have in the last six months succeeded in going to their homes and returning to Great Britain, through that Country.” Hanskie then produced his ace card. He called upon Lieutenant Meyer to give evidence.

Meyer, however, was unable to attend the court since at that very moment he was on leave from the regiment visiting his family in Germany. Hanskie and Beutler were found guilty of stealing the lugger and of deserting, but not of attempting to cross over to enemy lines – a charge which it would have been difficult to sustain without cutting all family leave for the Corp’s officers. Instead of being executed, the two soldiers were ordered to be transported as felons for life.

Transported to Australia on board the *Guildford*, Hanskie was

forwarded to Van Diemen's Land arriving on 19 February 1812. Having served less than six years of his life sentence, he was issued with a conditional pardon (Colonial Secretary's Register). In the following August he married Mary Carr or Kerr, a prisoner who had been transported on the *Alexander* and the couple received a 30 acre land grant at Pitt Water. At the time of the general muster taken in October and November 1819, the couple had erected a dwelling house and had seven acres under wheat and a further acre under potatoes and were employing an assigned servant. The rest of the grant had been converted into pasture and they were running a total of 124 sheep (Schaffer, 137; and Humble Petition of Godfrey Hanskie). The sheep, however, were to be the cause of much further trouble.

In July 1820 Hanskie was tried for receiving stolen ewes and sentenced by the Supreme Court in Sydney to 14 years transportation. He was shipped first to Newcastle and then on to Port Macquarie – a station which from the start had a problem with absconders (List of Prisoners transported to Newcastle, AONSW CSP, 6023; x820, p.9.) It is not clear when Hanskie attempted to make his bid for freedom, or whether he absconded in company with others. He was picked up on his own close to the settlement of Newcastle on 21 March 1822 (Morisset to Goulburn, 27 March 1822, AONSW, CSP, 6067; 4/1808.) Rather than being returned he was despatched to Sydney on board the *Elizabeth Henrietta* and from there forwarded to Hobart Town with orders to be sent to Macquarie Harbour and to be kept there until his 14 year colonial sentence had been completed (Colonial Secretary to Major Morisset, 1 April 1822, AONSW, CSP, 6009; 4/3505, p.106 and Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 10 April 1822, AONSW, CSP, 6067; 4/1808, p. 83.) There is more than a suggestion that the attempt that he had made to regain his freedom was not his first, the indent authorising his transfer back to Van Diemen's Land charged him with "having continued to escape from Port Macquarie" (Colonial Secretary to Major Morisset, 1 April 1822, AONSW, CSP, 6009; 4/3505, p.106

and Commandant to Colonial Secretary, 10 April 1822, AONSW, CSP, 6067; 4/1808, p.83.)

Hanskie arrived in Hobart Town in August 1822 in company with another six absconders from Port Macquarie and two runaways from Newcastle (List of eleven convicts embarked onboard H.M.C. Brig *Elizabeth Henrietta*, AONSW, CSP, 6010; 4/3508, p.12.) The nine men were housed in Hobart Town gaol while they waited for the next supply vessel to be ready for the run to Macquarie Harbour. It was a place which they were in no hurry to reach. On Saturday 14 May 1822 Hanskie and five others broke out of the gaol making their way to New Town where they managed to strike off their leg irons on Colonel Davy's farm. Shortly afterwards, they were apprehended by a detachment of soldiers and brought back. Freshly ironed they were marched to the magistrates and sentenced to receive 100 lashes each (Nicholls 368). They must have been placed on a colonial brig almost as soon as the sentence was complete for they arrived at Macquarie Harbour on 27 September.

Hanskie had only been at the settlement about a month before he was off again. He was brought back on 1 October 1822 and charged with "absenting himself from his work and absconding into the woods". Once more he was sentenced to receive 100 lashes and to serve six months in irons, although Commandant John Cuthbertson, a man not usually known for his charitable disposition, remitted the sentence to 50 lashes (436 Godfrey Hanskie, AOT, Con 31/18.) Not only was this the last time that Hanskie attempted to run, but by May of the following year he had crossed the lines once more and was working as an armed constable helping the settlement's garrison to track down absconders.

Although Lieutenant Meyer of the King's German Legion may not have been impressed with Hanskie as a soldier, Cuthbertson clearly was – and when it came to military experience he was a man who had it in spades. He had participated in "12 general engagements"

which included many of the most horrific encounters of the Peninsula War. He had survived the slaughter at Albuera when the 2nd battalion of the 48th Regiment had been cut down after it had been caught in the open by French cavalry. He had participated in the bloody assault on the breach at Badajoz where he had been amongst the 2000 British casualties. He had also been wounded at Talavera and more seriously at the Battle of the Pyrenees (Sergant, 14 and 83). Hanskie was amongst a number of convicts with former military experience who Cuthbertson used to augment the forces at his disposal.

The growing number of absconders shipped to Macquarie Harbour from New South Wales presented a particular problem. Many amongst these men were inveterate 'runners'. Of those who had tried to escape from the Hobart Town Gaol, James Lunt, Edward O'Hara and James Delany all absconded never to be recaptured and John Gough, a black seaman from the Isle of Wight, led three escape attempts before he was transferred back to Port Macquarie, the administration being at a loss to know what to do with him.

(For an account of Gough's career and in particular his role in the first Norfolk Island uprising see I. Duffield 'The Life and Death of "Black" John Goff: Aspects of the Black Convict Contribution to Resistance Patterns During the Transportation Era in Eastern Australia', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 33, 1 (1987), pp. 30-44.)

The first of these attempts had been a serious affair. Gough and six other prisoners had managed to surprise a detachment of the 48th regiment in the bush and seize their muskets. Armed they had proceeded north along the beach, an escape route that had been pioneered by Edward O'Hara earlier in the year. Cuthbertson despatched a party in a whaleboat up the coast to intercept the runaways at the Pieman River Heads. Hanskie was one of the armed members of that party. Later, Peter Keefe, another of the absconders attacked Hanskie in the Hobart Prison Barracks for the role that he had played in tracking them down.

Although his Macquarie Harbour defection earned Hanskie the ire of his fellow prisoners it was highly successful in cutting short his sentence to a penal station. Just over a year later he was back in Hobart Town. By the time the notice of his official appointment to the police appeared in the *Gazette* on 24 August 1824 he was already part of a tracking party on the East Coast of Van Diemen's Land (Hobart Town Gazette, 20 Aug 1824).

In company with another constable and an Aboriginal youth named Tegg or Teague he was despatched to the east coast in search of Mosquito. Walking overland to Oyster Bay in just three days, the party tracked down their prisoner whom they shot and wounded and brought back to Hobart Town (Calder 52-3).

The next year Hanskie's name appeared again in the *Hobart Town Gazette*. Following an attack by the bushrangers Matthew Brady and James McCabe on the assistant surveyor, Mr Wedge, the local police magistrate despatched a party of police under the leadership of "Godfrey Hanskey" in pursuit. It was a move of which the *Gazette* heartedly approved. It added that it now expected the "speedy apprehension" of the marauders as

Hanskey is, we understand, a Prussian, and one of the bravest that ever cocked a blunderbuss, or cut a robber's head off. If he happens to encounter McCabe and Brady, he *alone and unsupported*, will kill or capture both. (Hobart Town Gazette, 25 Mar 1825).

It transpires that Hanskey had first been employed in tracking down Brady in August 1824, a mere month after Mosquito had been hung. He has been described as one of the "bloodiest of the bushranger-chasers" and it is said that the Superintendent of Police, A.W.H. Humphrey regarded him as "one of his most useful thugs" (Fitzsymonds 38).

While it is easy to see Hanskie's military career as a series of comical episodes he had received training in two elite units. He also had active military experience, both with Schill's hussars and the KGL light infantry who were twice used to storm key positions in the French defences at Flushing. This combined with his experience as an absconder made him useful. That he operated in conjunction with an Aboriginal tracker is of interest. Teague was also employed in the pursuit of Brady. Indeed the partnership of the two appears to have been used as something of a model for later anti-bushranging and Aboriginal operations.

In this respect it is surely important that it was the magistrate Thomas Antsey who supervised much of the anti-bushranging operations in the Oatlands Police District in the mid-1820s. It was this same official who was the driving force behind the setting up of the "roving parties" that were deployed against Aboriginal people from 1829 onwards. Indeed Antsey was concerned that Van Diemen's Land would slide, not into guerrilla, but maroon warfare—a reference to the struggles between the British and runaway slaves and indigenous peoples in many plantation colonies of the New World (Pike 17-8).²⁸ While these "roving parties" are usually seen as being civilian bodies, many of those who served in them were men with former military experience. They included John Longworth, who had fought in the Caribbean, and Jorgen and Jorgenson, who had commanded a Danish privateer (Maxwell-Stewart 1999; Sprod 2001). These parties also included Aboriginal trackers (Pybus 98).

While the number of court martialled soldiers transported to Van Diemen's Land in the period before 1830 was relatively low, many other convicts had prior military experience in the Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, from 1824 onwards prisoners were routinely asked whether they had served with the military. Those that volunteered details of regimental service were disproportionately recruited into positions in

the field police or deployed as overseers and flagellators. As a consequence the Van Diemonian field police had a paramilitary character from the start—a point well illustrated by Hanskie’s career.

We live in an era where wars are increasingly fought by contractors, a move to disguise the scale of military operations through privatisation. Something similar happened in Van Diemen’s Land. Windschuttle might be right to argue that the soldiers played only a small part in operations against indigenous Van Diemonians—I would argue, however, that the operations fought out in the back blocks of Van Diemen’s Land were no less militarised for all of that. The terms ‘settler’ and ‘convict’ are phrases into which complex lives tend to be collapsed obscuring past experiences and blinding us to the proportion of Europeans who had experienced service during the Napoleonic Wars.

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